

Saving the Wanderers: James 5:19-20
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
Sunday, November 16th, 2008

When you come to the end of a letter, you normally expect to find some kind of personal greeting and farewell. This is certainly true in most of the New Testament letters. Just to give you one example, Paul ends his letter to the Philippian church with these words: "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." James is different. James concludes his letter somewhat abruptly. And rather than giving a kind word of personal greeting, he ends with a word about the importance of saving the wanderers. Another letter that ends in a similarly abrupt way is 1 John. The last verse says, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." But this kind of ending is unusual, so we need to ask why James ends in this way. I think what we're seeing here is another example of James' no-nonsense style. This letter is intensely practical. It is right in your face with command after command, quickly moving from one topic to another. And this conclusion fits right in with the pattern of the rest of the letter.

And this is an appropriate topic for James to conclude with, because we not only need to apply these things to our own personal lives, but we also need to hold one another accountable. This is a community project. We need to be in one another's lives, confessing sin to one another and praying for one another, as he writes in verse 16. But then there will also be times when individuals will not confess sin, will not share their struggles, will isolate themselves, and begin to wander from the truth. And James gives this final word to encourage us to go after those individuals.

It's fitting that we're studying these verses on a covenant affirmation Sunday. We've just received two new members into our fellowship, and this is something we take very seriously. We are a community of believers who are committed to one another. And a very important part of our commitment to one another is what James describes in these verses. We need to bring back the wanderers. We need to pursue those who are growing cold in the faith, those who are straying from the flock and beginning to cut themselves off from their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let's look at these verses, then, first examining what it looks like to wander from the truth and then what it means to save the wanderers.

I. Wandering from the Truth

“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth . . .” Notice that the phrase “anyone among you” was used in verses 13-14 as well as here in verse 19, and I think this shows us the flow of thought in these concluding verses of the letter. It’s really verses 13-20 that make up James’ conclusion, and he addresses a few different situations. In verse 13 he asks, “is anyone among you suffering?” And he instructs them to pray. He asks if anyone is cheerful and instructs them to sing praise. In that verse James is instructing *individuals* in how they can care for their own spiritual well-being.

In verse 14 he addresses those who are sick, and he outlines how they should go about seeking help from others. They are to call the elders, and the elders are to come and pray. Then verse 16 broadens the application of this. It’s not only the elders who are to pray for certain individuals, but we are all to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another. We need to look after our own spiritual well-being, but this is also a community project. We need to rely on one another and help one another and pray for one another.

Finally, in verse 19, he addresses another situation, “if anyone among you wanders from the truth.” This situation is different in that the person is not calling for help or confessing sin. Rather, they are wandering from the truth. And therefore this is something much more serious than suffering or sickness, because eternity is on the line. A believer may suffer horrible trials in life, or may face severe physical illness or disability, but by God’s grace those trials will produce steadfastness and maturity and joy in the Lord. Much more alarming is the person who begins to wander from the truth. This may very well be connected with some trial or sickness in a person’s life, because Satan will try to get a foothold in those situations and make us doubt God’s goodness. But it’s the wandering from the truth that is the fundamental concern. The trial may continue. The sickness may never be healed. But the question is: are you walking in the truth, or wandering from the truth?

Let me say two things about wandering from the truth.

1) There is such a thing as truth

We can no longer take this for granted in our culture. Truth is relative in the minds of many. You can have your truth, and I’ll have my truth. But there’s no absolute Truth. That kind of thinking may sound like a nice way to have friendly conversations with people of other faiths and worldviews. This kind of thinking may sound very enticing, and it has certainly had a huge impact on

our culture, including the American church. But the problem is it doesn't line up with Scripture, and it doesn't line up with reality. There is true and false. There is right and wrong. And these things are not up for debate. God has revealed Himself in His Word, and He is the One true God. The Triune God—Father, Son and Spirit. He has revealed that we are all sinners and have fallen short of God's perfect standard. And we deserve God's eternal punishment because of our sin. This is a sad truth, but a truth we cannot ignore. The wonderful truth is that God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die for sinners. He suffered and died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. And anyone who repents of their sin and turns to Jesus Christ in faith will be forgiven and will receive eternal life. This is the truth of the Gospel. And what I want us all to realize this morning is that these biblical truths are not relative. It's not as though they are true only for a certain portion of humanity. It's not the case that the Christians have their truth, and the Muslims have their truth, and the Hindus have their truth, and the Mormons have their truth, and the atheists have their truth. No, somebody's right and somebody's wrong. And Jesus Christ came into the world and said, "I am the way, and *the truth*, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Jesus Christ is the incarnate Truth of God. He taught the truth. He perfectly lived out the truth. And He is our only way to be reconciled to God.

There is such a thing as truth. James uses the word "truth" two other times in his letter. In 1:18 he is speaking of the Father of lights, and says, "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth." In other words, God regenerated us through the Gospel. We were born again, "brought forth," by this truth. Also in 3:14 James exhorts us, "if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth." Here we see that the truth is about much more than intellectual assent. Truth is not something that you merely agree to in your mind, but it must be lived out. In that verse we see that sinful attitudes like bitter jealousy and selfish ambition and boasting are a denial of the truth. The same point can be seen in 1 John 1:6, "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth." The truth is not only to be affirmed in our minds, but it is to be practiced in our daily lives.

There is such a thing as truth, revealed to us in the Person of Jesus Christ and in the written Word, and it is to transform both our thinking and our living. But, sadly, many have wandered from the truth.

2) Wandering from the truth is gradual

The second comment I want to make about wandering from the truth is that it is gradual. At the beginning of verse 19 James uses this word that he has used throughout the letter. He addresses his readers as “my brothers.” He’s speaking to his fellow believers. And then he says, “if *anyone among you* wanders from the truth.” So he has in mind the person who is part of the church, someone who has made a profession of faith and, up to this point has been living the life of a Christian. It seems that there has been fruit in the person’s life. There was an understanding of the Gospel, a desire for Bible reading and prayer. There was participation in the local church, fellowship with other believers. But now the person is wandering from the truth.

This wandering can happen in a variety of ways. As we just saw, the truth that James speaks of is something that transforms everything about us. We believe the truth in our minds and hearts, and we live out the truth in our actions and attitudes. So when someone begins to wander from the truth, it may start with wandering from the doctrinal truth of the Gospel, or it may begin with wandering from the holy life that is consistent with the Gospel. The two are certainly related, and the one will always end up affecting the other. But the wandering will probably first become apparent either in some kind of doctrinal error, or in some kind of immoral behavior.

Maybe you’re already thinking of individuals who have gone down one of these paths. Or maybe you were there yourself at one time. Maybe you are there now. Let me try to describe what this wandering might look like, and in each case I hope you’ll see how the wandering is gradual. On the one hand, the wandering may begin in the area of Christian doctrine. A young person who is active in the church youth group leaves for college (it might be a secular college; it might be a Christian college), and this young student is introduced to all kinds of new ideas, many of which are opposed to the Gospel. Those ideas begin to sink in. The student is intrigued by them and pursues them and embraces them and eventually denies the Gospel.

Another example would be a pastor or church leader or seminary professor who desperately wants to be more in touch with the culture and wants to see the culture impacted for Christ. It may begin with good intentions. But the desire to appeal to the culture gradually causes this person to compromise in certain areas. They stop talking about hell. They fail to emphasize that Jesus is the only way. And eventually, after many gradual changes, you find that the person is teaching things that are totally opposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

To get even more specific, I want to mention two movements that are having significant influence in seminaries and churches these days—two movements which are wandering from the truth. One is “open theism,” the notion that God does not know every detail of the future, because it is impossible to know the future actions of free creatures. God knows everything that can be known, they would say, but our future decisions are simply unknowable. This is a radical view of human free will and it drastically diminishes the omniscience of God and the sovereignty of God. And these are so-called evangelical theologians who are promoting this idea. But I’ll tell you, it didn’t happen over night. Their views changed, little by little, slowly compromising the truth of the Bible and accommodating the ideas of the world.

Another movement is known as evangelical feminism, or egalitarianism, which denies the distinct roles which God has given to men and women. Evangelical feminism denies the biblical model of male headship and wifely submission as described in Ephesians 5. They also reject the model of male leadership in the church, and argue that women, too, should serve as pastors and elders. And while I don’t think this view constitute a rejection of the Gospel, I do believe that they have compromised the authority and clarity of God’s Word in an attempt to accommodate the culture. And there are very serious dangers once you’re on that path, because the pressures of the culture don’t stop with ordaining women. Next comes condoning homosexual behavior, ordaining gay clergy, and sanctioning gay marriage. And we can look at individuals, and churches, and entire denominations who have gone down that road.

The word of warning to all of is that wandering from the truth can be very gradual and subtle. We need to be very aware of what we let influence us. We need to test everything according God’s Word. And we need to be committed to a church that upholds the truth.

Another way that the wandering process can begin is in the area of our actions and attitudes. Friendships with unbelievers may begin to have more influence in our lives than friendships with believers, and the wandering process begins. Harboring bitter thoughts against others in the church may result in cutting yourself off from those believers. Decisions about what to watch on TV may slowly lead to more and more compromise. Neglecting to give appropriate attention to your spouse will weaken, and possibly even destroy, your marriage. All of these things happen gradually, subtly, slowly.

There’s a song by Casting Crowns that makes this point very well. It’s called “Slow Fade.” “It’s a slow fade when you give yourself away. It’s a slow fade when black and white have

turned to gray. Thoughts invade, choices are made, a price will be paid. When you give yourself away. People never crumble in a day. It's a slow fade."

The reason I want to stress this point that wandering happens gradually is because I want us all to be on guard. This isn't so we can look out and be appalled at the fact that so many have wandered so far from the truth. My hope is that we would all look at our own hearts and see if there are any ways that *we* are beginning to wander. And then also to look at our brothers and sisters in Christ and see if we detect any of the earliest signs of wandering in their lives so that we can seek to bring them back before they wander further.

II. Saving the Wanderers

"My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 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 gives us some huge incentive here to go after the wanderers. He mentions those who wander from the truth, and then he shows us how weighty a thing it is to bring back the wanderers. Look at how he describes it. He will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. It seems odd that the subject of these verbs is the fellow-Christian. It's the fellow-Christian who saves the wanderer and covers a multitude of sins. How can that be? It's because God uses means. Only God can save. Only God can forgive sins. But God uses various means to bring us to faith and to keep us believing. And one very important tool that He uses is other believers.

Don't miss the implication of this verse. What would happen to this wanderer if nobody brought him back? His soul would not be saved from death, and his sins would not be covered (he would not be forgiven). And this raises the question: Does this verse teach that the wanderer is in danger of losing his salvation? Can you see how someone might take the verse that way? If the wanderer doesn't come back, he's not saved. He's not forgiven. The answer, though, is that the wanderer who never comes back was never truly saved. It's not that he was saved and then lost his salvation when he wandered from the truth. 1 John 2:19 shows this very clearly, "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." Departing from the flock and persistently wandering from the truth demonstrates that a person never was saved, no matter how fruitful their life once seemed. John Piper, in a sermon on James 5 said, "The final proof of who is a brother and who is not is perseverance of faith, not profession of faith" (sermon on James

5:16-20). There are many who make a start in the Christian life who do not persevere. And that's what makes these verses so weighty.

The last question is how to do this. How do we bring back the wanderers? The sad truth is that we won't always be successful. Unfortunately, there will be some who wander from the truth and will not heed the warnings of those who love them and plead with them to return. And what makes this so difficult is that we're trying to reach out and help individuals who, in many cases, don't want to be helped. But, nonetheless, we must pursue one another and ask each other the hard questions. When someone hasn't been at small group, or we haven't seen them at church in awhile, we need to call them. We need to see what's going on in their lives, how we can pray for them, how we can help them. If it turns out that they are, indeed, wandering from the truth, and are resistant to correction, we need to get some other people involved as well, following the Matthew 18 pattern. This may result in the person being removed from the membership of the church, if they do not repent of their sin. But even then, the goal is repentance and restoration. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul instructs the church concerning a man who was living in sexual immorality. And he told the church that this man should be removed from among you. But he states the purpose: "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."

This is always our goal as we seek out the wanderers. We want them to be saved from eternal death. We want their sins to be covered. We don't want them to make shipwreck of their faith. So be on guard concerning your own heart, lest you become a wanderer. And be on guard concerning those around you, lest they wander from the truth without anyone to admonish them and bring them back.

Now as I conclude this sermon, and also this sermon series through James, let me remind us of some of these things that we should be watching for, mainly in our own lives, but also as they relate to others who may be wandering. I'll summarize very briefly by listing four antitheses that James uses. In chapter 1 he contrasts hearing the word and doing the word. In chapter 2 he contrasts dead faith and active faith. In chapter 3 he contrasts wisdom from below and wisdom from above. And in chapter 4 he contrasts friendship with the world and friendship with God. The next time you read the letter of James I hope you'll think of these stark contrasts that he draws, and I trust you'll be convicted and encouraged in your faith. James is a letter that challenges us to have a real and active faith, and I pray that God will continue to use the many exhortations in this letter to spur us on in the fight of faith—that we would experience joy even in the midst of trials,

that we would show no partiality, that we would tame our tongues, that we would flee worldliness, that we would say “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that,” that we would not love riches, that we would be men and women of fervent prayer, and that we would bring back the wanderers.