



The Final Six Messages in the Book of James Series

Dr. Strauss preached his last message on August 15, 2013. He went home to the Lord on September 11, 1993, after an ordeal with multiple myeloma (bone cancer). Because he usually worked six weeks ahead, he had completed the remaining messages in the James series. A booklet of these sermons was produced; the chapters are available at SpiritualGold.org, in separate PDF files for easy downloading.

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Except where otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New King James Bible.

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Rescue the Perishing

James 5: 19-20

PURPOSE

To encourage believers to reach out to those who are straying from their walk with God.

I read of a lady in New York State who removed her valuable family jewels from a bank safety deposit box to wear to a wedding. The bank was closed when she got home, so she put the jewels in an old shaving case and stuffed that in another larger box. Unfortunately, she totally forgot what she had done and never remembered to return the jewels to the bank. Sometime later a friend was collecting items for a garage sale, and she gave her friend the old shaving case without ever looking inside of it. By the time she realized what she had done, the shaving case, with the precious gems inside, had been sold to an unknown buyer for a dime. She let something of immense value get away for practically nothing.¹

When I read that, it occurred to me that we often let something infinitely more valuable than jewels get away from us, and seldom think much about it. I'm talking about PEOPLE! People with eternal souls! Not precious stones that will someday be destroyed along with everything else on this earth. But precious people who will

live forever. People who make a profession of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, but somehow subsequently slip away from their commitment to Christ, and away from the fellowship of believers, and are from that time on lost to the work of the gospel and usefulness by God. And nobody seems to notice. It happened in the early years of the Christian church, and it happens today. And it forms the background for the last two verses of James' letter. He wanted to see those people RESTORED! And he concludes the book talking about their restoration—the reality of their restoration (v.19), and the results of their restoration (v.20). “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins” (vs.19-20).

Note first...

1. THE REALITY OF RESTORATION, v.19

We learn several important truths from this verse that will help us understand this whole matter of backsliding and restoration.

a. It is possible to stray from the truth

Turning a sinner from the error of his way and saving a soul from death sounds like this may be an evangelistic text—reaching the lost with the gospel. But James calls them “brothers.” That would indicate that they at least professed to be Christians. And he says “...if anyone among you wanders from the truth.” The wanderer is part of the community of believers. Whether or not he is truly born again may be in question, but at least he has made a profession of faith in Christ. He claims to be a Christian. He's in the church. Yet he wanders from the truth. I realize this is a conditional clause—“...if anyone wanders.” But the Greeks had a way of letting you know by the way they phrased the condition whether or not they thought it would be fulfilled. And it was quite probable that this one would be (Greek, third class, “future more probable”). From what James had observed, he knew it could happen, and probably would. And from what we observe today, we would have to agree that it does. People do stray from the truth.

But what does that mean? Jesus called Himself “the truth” (Jn.14:6), so, for one thing, it means that they slip away from a close personal relationship with Him. Their friendship with Him grows cool. Their daily walk with Him becomes less important. He seems to be farther and farther away and less and less approachable. But they not only wander away from the Lord, they wander away from the Word. Jesus said to His Father in heaven, “Your word is truth” (Jn.17:17). James has made reference to that “truth” earlier in this letter. In James 1:18 he said we are born again by the word of truth, i.e., the message of truth, the truth of the gospel. In James 3:14 he warned us against denying the truth by harboring wrong attitudes. Again, he is referring to the truth of God's Word—the Scriptures, the Bible! Sometimes professing Christians stray from their commitment to God's Word. They seldom read it. They're not sure they believe all of it. They don't think they need to obey it. That may be the foremost thing in James' mind here.

Jesus talked about doing the truth (Jn.3:21). Christian truth is not just something to believe; it is something to do. As one commentator put it: “Christian truth is not only an intellectual exercise; it is not only something which is the object of the search of the mind; it is not an academic affair; it is not a matter of knowledge and of opinion, of argument and of debate. Christian truth is always moral truth; it is always truth which issues in action; it is not only a process of the mind, it is also a way of life. It is not something to be studied, it is something to be done”²

That's been the major theme of James' letter—showing our faith by our life, being doers of the Word, not hearers only. He's mentioned things like not discriminating against people on a different social and economic level, showing mercy to people in need, controlling our tongues, maintaining harmonious relationships with other people, living pure lives, avoiding worldliness, not judging other Christians, not planning without God, enduring trials with patience and praying for one another. Straying from the truth means we're getting careless in matters like these. We're not nearly as concerned about living our lives in obedience to God's

Word as we used to be. If that's the way it is with us, then we've strayed from the truth, just as a sheep strays from the flock.

It's easy to do. Most of us probably underestimate the allure of the world, the weakness of our flesh, and the power of the devil. We think we're strong, that nothing will move us away from our commitment to Christ. And that's when Satan makes his move on us. On one of our trips to Scotland, Mary and I visited the Edinburgh Castle, high on a hill, overlooking the city. That castle was captured only once in its history. It was when its defenders thought the steepness of the rock on one side made it inaccessible and impregnable, so they put no sentries there. In the grey mist of the early morning a little party of the enemy crept up the precipitous slopes and surprised the garrison into surrender. It was captured at its strongest point.³ The same thing happens to us. Satan gets to us where we think we're strongest. And as a result there are sometimes periods during our Christian pilgrimage when we stray from the truth.

It is entirely possible that some who have strayed were never really serious in the first place about turning from their sin and trusting the finished work of Christ on Calvary's cross to save them from sin. They went through the motions of making some kind of decision, but they were never truly born again. "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 they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us" (1 Jn.2:19). But whichever the case, saved or unsaved, people do wander from the truth. That is without question a distinct possibility.

The second thing we learn here is that:

b. It is possible to be restored to the fold

"...and someone turns him back." The old King James Version translated this "and one convert him," as if he were an unbeliever. But the word (epistrephe) simply means "to turn around," or "to turn back." It's the same word Jesus used with Peter when He predicted that Peter would deny Him: "...when you have turned back, strengthen your brethren" (Lk.22:32). Peter was a believer; he didn't need to be converted. But he had wandered from the truth, and

he needed to turn back. We too are weak and fallible human beings, and we too go astray. Sometimes we get hooked on some false doctrine. And sometimes we fall into deep sin. But God doesn't discard us like so much trash. He considers us to be of far too much value for that. So He asks us to acknowledge our sin and to turn from it. And He invites us to be restored to His fellowship and to the fellowship of other believers. He invites us to come home, to be restored to the fold.

Unfortunately, we don't always have the same perspective God has on believers who stray. We're often quick to condemn them, to look down on them, to scorn them, to avoid them, simply to put them on the inactive roll, or even to excommunicate them. God wants to see them turn back. He wants them restored.

A few years ago, an angry man rushed through the Rijks Museum in Amsterdam until he reached Rembrandt's famous painting "Nightwatch." Then he took out a knife and slashed it repeatedly before he could be stopped. A short time later, a distraught, hostile man slipped into St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome with a hammer and began to smash Michelangelo's beautiful sculpture, The Pieta. Two cherished works of art were severely damaged. But what did officials do? Throw them out and forget about them? Certainly not! Using the best experts, who worked with the utmost care and precision, they made every effort to restore the treasures.

We need to have the same attitude toward believers who have wandered from the truth and been damaged by sin. They have far more value than works of art. Our first thought should be to restore them, not to condemn them.

But there is still another important truth in this verse that we cannot miss...

c. It is our responsibility to help each other

While God is actually the only one who can restore a sinning believer, we are the instruments He wants to use. Not just pastors, or elders, or teachers, but all of us. James makes it as broad

as he can by writing, "...and someone turns him back." "Someone" means "anyone." The local church is to be a loving, caring, compassionate community of believers who look out for each other's welfare. And it will be to our best interests to keep walking close to God and obeying His Word. That goes for all of us. So if we see someone who is losing his grip on the truth, who is slipping away from his close personal relationship with the Lord, who is allowing sin to get a foothold in his life, we need to go after him. Not condemn him, not avoid him, but reach out in love and endeavor to bring him back.

It's much easier to say things like, "What he does is none of my business. It's his choice. I'm not going to barge in where I'm not wanted. Besides, he won't listen to me. Let him go; he wasn't any help to us anyway; he was nothing but trouble. Good riddance." That may be the easy way, but it is not God's way. God wants us to pray and to work to bring those wandering ones back to spiritual wholeness and usefulness in the Body.

Howard Hendricks tells the story of a former pastor who fell into an illicit sexual relationship. He said he felt like an exhausted swimmer battling alone in the pounding surf, unable to escape the strong undertow, about to go down for the last time. On shore he could see all the people of his church. Some were shaking their heads in weeping and despair; others were shouting and shaking their fists in anger and frustration. But one person, only one, risked everything, plunged into the water, and helped him to safety.⁴ Are you willing to be that one person? That doesn't bypass the need for church discipline. But our goal should always be restoration, not condemnation. Because it is our responsibility to help each other.

So much for the reality of restoration. We turn now to...

2. THE RESULTS OF RESTORATION, v.20

"Let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins"

(5:20). James suggests two major results of restoring an errant brother or sister:

a. A soul is saved

Again, to save a soul from death sounds like this wanderer is lost and on his way to hell. And, as we have suggested, that is a possibility. We know he wasn't saved and then lost again. Spiritual birth is similar to physical birth in that it only happens once. If a Christian wanders away from the Father's house, he doesn't stop being his Father's child. He's still in the family. He simply needs to come home. But it is possible that this person made a profession of faith in Christ but never meant business with God, that he was never truly born again. In that case, bringing him back could mean saving him from eternal spiritual death, rescuing this perishing one from hell.

But we decided that he was probably a true believer who got into doctrinal error, or fell into dreadful sin. To save a soul from death could mean to rescue him from physical death. The word soul (psuche) can simply mean "life." Jesus used these very same words that way when He said, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" (Mk.3:4). And we know that premature physical death can be God's ultimate disciplinary act against a sinning believer. It was sin in the lives of believers at the Lord's table in Corinth that resulted in sickness and death (1 Cor.11:30). And the Apostle John spoke of sin that leads to physical death (1 Jn.5:16). So James could be reminding us that a person who is used of God to bring a wandering believer back to the fold actually saves a life from premature physical death. He rescues someone from perishing physically.

That sounds like a worthwhile endeavor. There are entire professions dedicated to saving lives—like the medical profession, in all of its related fields. But all of us in the local church can dedicate ourselves to saving lives by reaching out in love to those who are straying from the truth and falling into sin's clutches. Will you be a life-saver? Not the candy kind, but the kind that saves human lives.

There's a second result...

b. Many sins are covered

"A multitude of sins," says James. This could mean they are covered by the blood of Christ, forgiven. The Psalmist cried out, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Ps.32:1; cf. also Ps.85:2). When we confess and forsake our sins, they are placed under Christ's atoning blood, never to be remembered again. They will never be seen again. They will never be exposed to God's judgment. The prophet Micah said they are cast into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19). They're gone, forever!

But the covering of our sins could have another implication as well. When we reach out to rescue and restore an erring believer, it is usually because we have become aware of some glaring sin in his life. But if he repents and turns from that sin, nobody else ever has to know about it. We don't need to broadcast it all over the church. We quietly put it under wraps and let its memory fade away. Solomon said it in the Proverbs: "But love covers all sins" (Prov.10:12). Peter repeated it in his first letter: "...for love will cover a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). No publicity! No fanfare! Just quiet, loving encouragement and support. That's the way it's supposed to work in the Body of Christ. That helps bring wholeness to the Body, as well as wholeness to the individual.

CONCLUSION

Robert Robinson, author of the hymn "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," experienced a lapse in his spiritual life, a time when he was deeply troubled because of sin in his life. Hoping to relieve his mind, he decided to travel. During one of his journeys, he struck up a conversation with a young Christian woman. As they talked, she realized that he was well informed on spiritual matters, so she asked him what he thought of a hymn she had just been reading. To his utter amazement he found it to be the song he had written. He tried to evade her question, but she continued to press him for a response. Suddenly he began to weep.

"I'm the man who wrote that hymn many years ago," he finally admitted. "I'd give anything to experience again the joy I knew then." The lady reassured him that the "streams of mercy" he had written about in his song still flowed, and encouraged him to turn back to the Lord for forgiveness and restoration. He was deeply touched and turned his "wandering heart" back to the Lord.

May the Spirit of God make us just as sensitive to His leading as that young woman was, and help us to restore the erring ones, just as she did.

Maybe you are one of the erring ones. Won't you come home? Could it be that you're not yet in the family? Are you alienated from God? He hasn't moved, He wants you to be in His family. He reaches out in love seeking to forgive us of our sinful condition and receive us to Himself. It is the sin problem that separates us from Him. However, in His love He sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, to bear the punishment that we deserve. It is through Jesus' shed blood on the cross that the way is provided to be received into His family. We need to trust what He did on the cross personally and receive Him as Savior. Put your faith in God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as your Savior now!

¹Our Daily Bread, Sept. 30, 1986, M.R. DeHaan II.

²The Letters of James and Peter, Barclay, p.157, Westminster Press.

³The Behavior of Belief, Part III, Spiro Zodhiates, p.216, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., March 1966.

⁴Footprints, Walking Through the Passages of Life, Howard & Jeanne Hendricks, p.42, Multnomah Press.