

The Book of James, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 13: Bringing Back the Wanderer

James 5:19–20

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The doctrinal core of this final lesson is the reality that believers can wander from the truth and the church's shared responsibility to bring them back. James assumes that someone among you, a member of the family of faith, can stray from the truth into spiritual danger, and he calls fellow believers to go after them. This is an important doctrinal point to teach clearly and consistent with the rest of the study: the Christian life is a walk that can be abandoned, and salvation is preserved through ongoing faith and faithfulness, not by a presumption that once saved means always saved regardless of how one lives. At the same time, the tone is not fearful but hopeful and loving: wanderers can be brought home, and that restoration saves a soul from death and covers a multitude of sins.

There is rich teaching here on restoration, the seriousness of wandering, and the dignity of the work of bringing one another back. James entrusts this ministry not only to elders but to any brother or sister who will go after a straying member, echoing Jesus's parable of the lost sheep and Paul's call to restore the fallen gently. The phrases save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins underscore both the gravity of drifting and the power of repentance and grace. This is an opportunity to teach God's seeking heart, the goal of restoration rather than condemnation, and the church as a community responsible for one another's perseverance.

Because this lesson concludes the study, your aim is both to teach the passage faithfully and to help students look back across the whole letter of James, a sustained call to a living, obedient faith that works through love. The closing on restoration ties the letter together: the faith James has described shows itself, at the last, in costly care for one another's souls. Formationally, this lesson calls students to take responsibility for the spiritual well-being of those around them, to examine their own drifting, and to take up the hopeful work of bringing wanderers home. Keep the tone serious about the stakes and warm about the grace, sending students out as people who watch over one another in love.

Question 1

Student Question:

James writes, "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth" (v. 19). What does it teach that James assumes even those within the family of faith can wander from the truth, and what does this reveal about the nature of the Christian life and the danger of drifting?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

James opens his closing with a sobering assumption: “if anyone among you wanders from the truth.” The phrase among you is crucial. James is not speaking of outsiders but of members of the family of faith. He assumes that real believers can and sometimes do wander from the truth.

Teach the nature of wandering. The word suggests a straying, a drifting off the path, sometimes gradual and almost unnoticed. People rarely decide in a moment to abandon the faith; they drift, in devotion, in obedience, in belief, in fellowship, one small step at a time, until they find themselves far from where they began.

Connect this to the doctrinal commitments of the whole study, clearly and pastorally. Scripture takes seriously that Christians can fall away and must remain faithful; salvation is preserved through ongoing faith and obedience, not guaranteed regardless of how one lives. James's realism here is consistent with the New Testament's many warnings against drifting and falling away. This guards students from a false security that ignores the danger of wandering.

Apply it without inducing fear. The point is not anxiety about losing salvation through a single misstep, but sober watchfulness: the Christian life is a path that requires perseverance, and drifting is a real danger to take seriously, in ourselves and in others. This sets up the hopeful call to restoration that follows.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The reality that believers can wander from the truth (Hebrews 3:12–14).
- Wandering as gradual drifting, often unnoticed, in devotion, belief, or obedience.
- Salvation preserved through ongoing faith and faithfulness, against once-saved-always-saved.
- Sober watchfulness rather than fearful anxiety about the danger of drifting.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that James assumes those among us can wander?
- How does wandering usually happen, suddenly or gradually?
- Why is it important to take the danger of drifting seriously?

Question 2

Student Question:

Be honest about your own walk. Where do you sense yourself beginning to drift, in devotion, obedience, fellowship, or belief, even subtly? What is the truth you need to return to?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the realism of wandering inward before students think only of others. We are all susceptible to drift, and honest self-examination guards against the self-deception of assuming it could never be us.

Help students examine the common areas of drift. Devotion can cool, prayer and Scripture can fade, obedience can slacken, fellowship can lapse, and beliefs can quietly erode under the pressure of the surrounding culture. Drift usually begins small and in one area before it spreads.

Encourage specific honesty. Rather than a general admission that no one is perfect, invite students to name the particular place where they sense themselves beginning to drift, and the specific truth they need to return to. Naming it is the first step back.

Point toward return. The good news of the passage is that wanderers can be brought home, and that includes us. The same grace that we are called to extend to others is available to us. Encourage any who sense drift to take a concrete step back toward the Lord this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Universal susceptibility to drift, calling for self-examination.
- Common areas of drift: devotion, prayer, obedience, fellowship, belief.
- The danger of self-deception that assumes it could never be us.
- The availability of grace and return for the drifting believer.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you sense yourself beginning to drift?
- What specific truth do you need to return to?
- What is one concrete step back toward the Lord this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

James speaks of someone who “brings him back,” describing a believer who goes after a wanderer and turns him back to the truth (vv. 19–20). What does this teach about our shared responsibility for one another's souls, and who does James entrust this work of restoration to?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 19 describes the rescuer: “someone brings him back.” James envisions a believer who notices the wanderer, goes after them, and turns them back to the truth. This is the heart of the passage and a vital teaching on the church's mutual responsibility.

Teach our shared responsibility for one another's souls. James does not say to leave the wanderer to God alone or to mind our own business. He calls us to active, pursuing love that goes after the straying. This reflects the heart of the Good Shepherd, who leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one lost sheep, and it makes us participants in His seeking work.

Note whom James entrusts this to: anyone among you. While elders bear special responsibility for the flock, the work of restoration is not reserved for leaders. Any brother or sister who

notices a wanderer can and should go after them in love. This dignifies ordinary believers as agents of restoration.

Apply it with reference to how easily communities let people drift away unnoticed. People slip out of fellowship and no one calls; they begin to stray and no one goes after them. James calls for a community that takes responsibility, that notices, that pursues. Invite students to consider whom they might need to go after.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Shared responsibility for one another's souls within the body of Christ.
- Active, pursuing love that goes after the wanderer (Luke 15:3–7).
- Restoration entrusted to any believer, not only to elders (Galatians 6:1).
- The Good Shepherd's seeking heart reflected in the church.

Discussion Prompts

- What does this teach about our responsibility for one another?
- Whom does James entrust the work of restoration to?
- Why do communities so easily let people drift away unnoticed?

Question 4

Student Question:

Think of the people God has placed around you in the body of Christ. How seriously do you take your responsibility for their spiritual well-being, and where might God be calling you to a more active love for a brother or sister?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the call to mutual responsibility to the specific people God has placed around the student. It moves from principle to the actual relationships in their life.

Help students assess honestly how seriously they take responsibility for others' spiritual well-being. Many of us care about our own walk but rarely think of ourselves as responsible for the perseverance of the brothers and sisters around us. James reframes this as a shared duty of love.

Be clear about what this responsibility looks like, to avoid both extremes. It is not controlling or judgmental meddling, but attentive, prayerful love that notices when someone is struggling and is willing to reach out, encourage, and, when needed, gently go after them. It is the opposite of indifference.

Encourage a concrete step toward one person. Is there a brother or sister who is struggling, absent, or drifting whom God is calling them to reach out to in love? The work of restoration begins with one act of attentive care toward one real person.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Responsibility for the perseverance of fellow believers as a duty of love.
- Restoration as attentive, prayerful love, not controlling meddling.
- The opposite of indifference toward the struggling and absent.
- Concrete care for real people as the start of restoration.

Discussion Prompts

- How seriously do you take responsibility for others' spiritual well-being?
- Whom is God calling you to a more active love for?
- What is one attentive step you could take toward them this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

James says that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering “will save his soul from death” (v. 20). What does this teach about the spiritual seriousness of wandering from the truth, and what is at stake when a believer drifts away unchecked?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 20 reveals the stakes: bringing back a wanderer “will save his soul from death.” This is sobering language that underscores the spiritual seriousness of wandering from the truth. What is at stake is nothing less than a soul.

Teach the gravity honestly. James is not exaggerating. To wander from the truth unchecked is to move toward spiritual death; the drifting believer is in genuine danger. This is consistent with the New Testament's serious warnings to those who turn away. We must not treat wandering as a harmless phase or a private matter of no consequence.

At the same time, frame this within hope, not fatalism. The very reason James tells us the stakes is to move us to act, because the wanderer can be brought back and the soul can be saved. The seriousness is a summons to loving action, not a pronouncement of doom.

Apply it to how we view drifting friends and family. When we grasp that a soul is at stake, we can no longer be indifferent or merely polite. Love compels us to care, to pray, to reach out, to go after them. Help students feel the weight that should move them past their hesitation.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The spiritual seriousness of wandering: a soul moving toward death.
- The genuine danger of the drifting believer (Hebrews 10:26–31; 2 Peter 2:20–22).
- The stakes as a summons to loving action, not fatalistic doom.
- Love compelled to act when a soul is at stake.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that a wanderer's soul is in danger of death?
- How does grasping the stakes change your view of a drifting loved one?
- What fears or excuses keep you from acting?

Question 6

Student Question:

How does understanding what is truly at stake, a soul saved from death, change the way you view a friend or family member who is drifting from the Lord? What fears or excuses tend to keep you from acting?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the stakes to the student's relationships and confronts the excuses that keep us passive. When we truly believe a soul is at stake, indifference becomes impossible, yet we still hesitate.

Help students name the fears and excuses. Common ones include fear of rejection, fear of seeming judgmental, the excuse that it is not our place, the discomfort of a hard conversation, or the assumption that someone else will do it. Naming these honestly is the first step to overcoming them.

Reframe the action as love, not condemnation. Going after a wanderer is not about scolding or controlling but about caring enough to pursue. Done in the gentleness Paul commends (Galatians 6:1), it is one of the most loving things one believer can do for another.

Encourage courage grounded in the stakes and in grace. The same God who calls us to go also goes with us and works through our feeble efforts. Invite students to identify one drifting person and one loving step toward them, trusting God with the outcome.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Overcoming the fears and excuses that keep us passive.
- Pursuing the wanderer as love, not condemnation (Galatians 6:1).
- Gentleness and humility in the work of restoration.
- Courage grounded in the stakes and in God's accompanying grace.

Discussion Prompts

- What fears or excuses keep you from reaching out to a drifting person?
- How is going after a wanderer an act of love rather than judgment?
- Whom will you take one loving step toward, trusting God with the result?

Question 7

Student Question:

James adds that the one who brings back a wanderer “will cover a multitude of sins” (v. 20). What does this teach about the power of repentance and restoration, and about God's heart toward the sinner who is brought home?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

James completes the promise: the one who brings back a wanderer “will cover a multitude of sins.” This phrase, echoed in 1 Peter 4:8, points to the power of repentance and restoration to deal with sin through God's grace.

Teach what covering sins means here. When a wanderer is brought back to the truth, their many sins are covered, forgiven and put away, through repentance and the grace of God. The restoration does not merely improve behavior; it brings the sinner back into the place of forgiveness. Grace covers what would otherwise condemn.

Draw out God's heart toward the returning sinner. This is the heart of the father in the parable of the prodigal, who runs to embrace the returning son; the heart of the shepherd who rejoices over the one sheep found. God is not reluctant to forgive the returning wanderer; He delights in it. The covering of a multitude of sins reveals the abundance of His mercy.

Apply it as motivation and hope. The work of restoration is not grim damage control but participation in joyful grace. When we help bring someone home, we are part of a multitude of sins being covered and a soul being restored to the God who delights to forgive. This should fill the work with hope rather than dread.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The covering of sins through repentance and God's grace (1 Peter 4:8).
- Restoration bringing the sinner back into the place of forgiveness.
- God's delighting, seeking heart toward the returning sinner (Luke 15:20–24).
- The abundance of God's mercy toward those brought home.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that restoration covers a multitude of sins?
- What does this reveal about God's heart toward the returning sinner?
- How does this fill the work of restoration with hope?

Question 8

Student Question:

Where do you need to extend to someone the kind of restoring grace that covers sin rather than condemning, and where do you need to receive that grace yourself? How does God's mercy toward you shape how you pursue others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the theme of restoring grace in both directions, extending it and receiving it. The student who pursues a wanderer must do so in grace, and many students also need to receive that grace themselves.

Help students consider where they need to extend restoring rather than condemning grace. It is possible to confront a wanderer in a spirit of superiority or judgment that drives them further away. James and Paul both call for restoration that covers and heals, mirroring God's mercy.

Help them also consider where they need to receive grace. Some students are themselves the wanderer, carrying sin and shame, unsure whether they can come home. Assure them of God's covering mercy toward all who return. The same grace they are to extend is freely offered to them.

Tie it to motivation. Our pursuit of others flows best from our own experience of mercy. The more deeply we grasp how God has covered our own multitude of sins, the more freely and gently we will go after others. Invite students to let mercy received fuel mercy extended.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Restoring grace that covers and heals rather than condemns.
- Receiving God's covering mercy for our own wandering.
- Mercy received as the fuel for mercy extended.
- Gentleness in restoration mirroring God's mercy toward us.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you need to extend restoring grace rather than condemnation?
- Where do you need to receive that grace for your own wandering?
- How does God's mercy toward you shape how you pursue others?

Question 9

Student Question:

This passage forms the conclusion of the whole letter of James, with no formal farewell, ending instead on the work of restoration. Why is it significant that James ends his intensely practical

letter precisely here, and how does this closing tie together the themes of the whole book, a faith that acts in love?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question reflects on the striking way James ends his letter, with no formal farewell, closing instead on the work of restoration. The abruptness is significant and worth pondering with students.

Teach the significance of the ending. James, the most intensely practical letter in the New Testament, concludes not with a benediction but with a call to go after the wandering. This placement signals that mutual care for one another's souls is not an afterthought but a fitting climax to everything he has said. The letter ends in action, as it has urged throughout.

Show how this ties the whole letter together. James has insisted from the start on a faith that works, that hears and does, that shows itself in deeds of love. The closing call to bring back the wanderer is that very faith in its most costly and loving form: faith that takes responsibility for a brother or sister's soul. The book ends by embodying its own message.

Help students see the unity of the letter. Trials, temptation, the tongue, wealth, partiality, patience, prayer, all of it has been pressing toward a living, obedient, loving faith. The final two verses gather it up: this faith, at the last, goes after the straying and brings them home. A faith that acts in love is the thread that runs through the whole book.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The significance of ending on restoration rather than a formal farewell.
- Mutual care for souls as a fitting climax to the letter, not an afterthought.
- The closing call as the embodiment of James's whole message: faith that works.
- The unity of James around a living, obedient, loving faith.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it significant that James ends precisely here?
- How does the closing call embody the message of the whole letter?
- How does a faith that acts in love tie the book of James together?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole letter of James. From trials to temptation, from the tongue to wealth, from patience to prayer, James has called us to a living, working faith, and now to bring one another home. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to live out the faith of James, especially in caring for the souls around you.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This final capstone asks students to look back across the entire letter and name one specific way Jesus is calling them to live out the faith of James, especially in caring for the souls around them. It is both the capstone of the lesson and of the whole study.

Help students survey the journey. From counting trials joy, to resisting temptation, to doing the word, to loving without favoritism, to a living faith that works, to taming the tongue, to wisdom from above, to friendship with God rather than the world, to humble dependence, to right use of wealth, to patient endurance, to a life of prayer, and finally to bringing back the wanderer, James has called for one thing: a faith that is alive and shows itself in love.

Encourage a single, ownable commitment that integrates the study, ideally one that includes both personal obedience and care for others, since the letter ends on that note. Where is Jesus calling them to let their faith become visible, both in their own walk and in watching over the souls around them?

Close the entire study with hope and grace. James is demanding, but his aim is not to burden but to form people who genuinely look like Jesus, whose faith is alive and working. Lift students' eyes to Christ, who gives the living faith James describes and who walks with His people as they live it out and bring one another home. Let them leave the study not merely better informed but truly being formed into doers of the word who love one another to the end.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The whole letter as a call to a living, obedient, loving faith.
- Personal obedience joined with care for the souls of others.
- Christ as the giver and sustainer of the living faith James describes.
- Sanctification as becoming doers of the word who watch over one another.

Discussion Prompts

- In one sentence, how is Jesus calling you to live out the faith of James?
- How will you join personal obedience with care for the souls around you?
- Looking back over the whole study, what one truth most needs to take root in your life?