

The Book of James

Lesson 13: Bringing Back the Wanderer -- James 5:19-20

Letters in the ancient world usually ended the way ours do, with greetings, blessings, a warm farewell. James ends differently. He stops abruptly, almost mid-stride, with two short verses about a single subject: what to do when one of us wanders away. There is no closing benediction, no list of names to greet. The last word of this intensely practical letter is a call to go after the straying brother or sister. It is as if James cannot bring himself to sign off without making sure we will not let each other drift away unnoticed.

My brothers, he writes, 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. Notice the realism in those words. Among you. James assumes that even within the family of faith, people can and do wander from the truth. The Christian life is a path, and it is possible to drift off it, slowly or suddenly, and end up far from where we began.

This is sobering, and James means it to be. The wanderer is in real danger. To bring him back is to save a soul from death and to cover a multitude of sins. The stakes could not be higher. But notice also the hope and the dignity James gives to the work of restoration. The one who goes after the wanderer participates in the rescue of a soul. There is no more important work than this, and James entrusts it not only to elders or leaders but to anyone among us, to brothers and sisters who love one another enough to go and bring each other home.

So the whole letter, with all its hard words about trials and temptation, faith and works, the tongue and wealth and patience and prayer, comes to rest here, in the loving, costly work of watching out for one another. James will not let us walk this road alone or let our neighbor wander off the edge of it unnoticed. We are our brother's keeper after all. So we come to this final passage to feel the seriousness of wandering, to recover our shared responsibility for one another's souls, and to take up the holy, hopeful work of bringing the wanderer home.

Group Discussion: Why do you think it is so easy for a church or a friendship to let someone quietly drift away without going after them? What would a community look like that truly took responsibility for one another the way James describes?

Personal Reflection: Is there someone you know who has wandered from the truth, or are you yourself drifting in some area? What is one step of love, toward them or toward returning, that this passage is calling you to take?

Read James 5:19-20

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Galatians 6:1–2, restoring one caught in transgression gently, bearing one another's burdens; Luke 15:3–7, the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one

lost sheep; Matthew 18:12-15, going to win back a brother who sins; Hebrews 3:12-14, exhorting one another daily lest any be hardened; Ezekiel 34:1-16, God's heart to seek the strays His shepherds neglected; 1 Peter 4:8, love covers a multitude of sins.