

James
Search & Rescue: Every Believer's Mission
James 5:19-20
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Well, it's been an amazing 18 months or so journey through this great letter of James. James, of course, the half-brother of our Lord who came after the resurrection to embrace his Brother as Lord and Messiah, as Master and Sovereign. I almost hate to come to the end of this letter because I feel like I'm saying goodbye to a man who has become a dear friend. Someone who has literally opened his heart for us to allow us to see what motivated him, what compelled him, and what should compel us as well. But we come today to the last two verses and the conclusion of this great New Testament letter.

In December, in the days leading up to Christmas, the entire country was transfixed on the drama of a search-and-rescue operation and its race against time. At one point, 80 expert mountaineers inched their way up the steep slopes of Mount Hood searching for 3 experienced climbers. These 80 or so experts were backed up by Blackhawk and Chinook helicopters. There were several C-130 aircraft. There were un-manned aerial drones with heat-seeking sensors. All of this manpower and all of this technical equipment was brought to bear to rescue 3 men. You know, I think it was more than morbid curiosity that captured the nation in that drama that unfolded there. I think, because we're made in the image of God, we understand the value of human life. We could all imagine our own struggle and our own emotions if one of those men were a close family member of ours and in that case, we would agree that almost no cost would be too high as long as there was a chance, as long as there was hope of finding them alive. As I thought about that search-and-rescue operation this question came to my mind: If the physical lives of people made in the image of God are so inherently valuable, then what should we be willing to do to rescue those who are in spiritual danger?

You see if you're a Christian this morning, if you're truly a follower of Jesus Christ, then you have your place on the church's, search and rescue team. You and I are always on call ready at a moment's notice to leave our comfort zone and to go on a spiritual search and rescue mission.

James ends his epistle with a call to remember this crucial mission we all have. We all, without exception, are given the responsibility for. Notice the two verses with which he ends his letter.

James 5:19:

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one brings him back, let him know that the one who has turned a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

Those are two wonderful verses, but when you think about it at first glance, they're a very strange way, a most unusual way, to end his letter.

Most of the New Testament epistles, if you're familiar with the New Testament all you know this, most of them end with some sort of a greeting or some sort of a benediction. But James isn't most New Testament authors and James isn't most Testament books. It really reads less like a letter, as we've gone through it, and more like a series of sermons and so it's not surprising that as his conclusion, like all good sermons, James calls for a commitment and specifically here, he calls for a commitment to mutual care and concern within the church. He wants us to know that, as we've gone through this book over and over again, we've been called to make changes in our lives and if we're not careful, we can become inward focused, only concerned about our own spiritual life. He wants us to know that no Christian can live as an island. Instead, we have a responsibility beyond us to others. In fact, in just the previous paragraph here in James 5, James reminded us that each of us has a responsibility to deal with our own sin. Verse 16, he says, "therefore, confess your sins to one another." In other words, if you are in sin that you confess, it to the Lord but if you sinned against someone else, confess it to them too and seek their forgiveness and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

The emphasis here is if you find yourself at some point of Divine discipline, deal with it there, don't let it go as far as the man let it go in verses 14-15 who came to a point of serious illness, even on the brink of death, because of the Divine chastening on his unrepentant sin. So, deal with your sin, James is saying.

But we not only have a responsibility to deal with our own sin quickly and completely, we also have a Biblical responsibility to one another. Our Lord requires each of us to be alert to the danger in the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and so when we learn that someone who claims to know Jesus Christ has strayed from the path of righteousness, who is risking falling to their spiritual death as it were, we are compelled by the principal love and by our Lord's very direct commands to go ourselves on a search and rescue mission to attempt to save that fellow Christian. This is an inherent obligation on every believer. In fact, Alfred Plummer puts it this way in his commentary. he says, "there is something fatally wrong about us if we have no strong desire to bring centers back to God? Exactly right. And James 5:19-20 is a spiritual mandate to try to restore a professing Christian who is living in unrepentant sin.

James' mandate here consists of three parts that I want us to look at together this morning. A mandate to go on a search and rescue operation. That mandate contains these three parts.

The first part is: recognize a straying brother.

Look at the first part of verse 19. "My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth."

Now, before we look at the meaning of this verse in its context just kind of, by the way, as an aside, let me mention that this statement implies two realities that are very important and that run contrary to secular postmodern thought and to the form of postmodern thought that's infecting the church in the emergent church movement. Because this statement of James tells us, number one: there is clear, knowable truth. Postmodern thought would say that there is no absolute truth and that we need to interpret the Bible with sort of a hermeneutic of humility and not being too dogmatic about anything and so I can't never say what you're doing is wrong or what you're teaching is wrong because that would be arrogant of me. But James here says, no, there is clear, knowable truth and, secondly, we can be certain about that truth and about sin and error - certain enough to address it, to see it and recognize it, and address it in the lives of others.

Now, let's go back to verse 19. We're to recognize a straying brother.

The first issue we have to address in this first expression is: what is the true spiritual condition of this person who is straying from the truth? There are two common opinions about what's going on here. Some commentators argue that the one sinning in verses 19-20 is a professing believer who is really not a genuine Christian at all. Now, obviously that has been a concern of James', you remember back to our study of James chapter 1, as well as James chapter 2 beginning in verse 14 through the end. In both places, James addressed the reality that you can claim to be a Christian, you can sit here this morning and say, "oh yeah, I'm a Christian," and not be - that there is such a thing, sadly, as a professing believer having what James calls, "dead faith." That is, dead, non-saving faith. Your faith may be like that of the demons. They believe that Jesus is the Son of God. They believe that He came into the world. They believe that He lived a perfect life. They believe that He died for sinners. They believe that anyone who puts their faith and trust in Him will be saved eternally. They believe that He was resurrected from the dead. They believe all those things, and yet not one of them will ever be in the presence eternally of the One whom they have spurned. There is such a thing as dead, non-saving faith in Jesus Christ. So, this could be James' concern here. He could be addressing that issue and, in fact, the word sinner in verse 20, when you look at that word in the rest of the New Testament, it usually refers to unbelievers. So it may be that this is what James is addressing. If this is what James is saying, here's what he's telling us. He's saying we must confront those professing believers who really aren't with their lostness, those in the church who claim to be in Christ, we need to confront them with the reality that they are not in Christ.

Well, certainly we do need to do that. But other commentators argue, on the other hand, that the sinning person in these verses must be a Christian. They point out, for example, that he begins by saying, "my brethren," which is usually used of fellow believers. In addition, notice verse 19 says, "if any among you strays."

So, in other words they would say, "look, this person in verses 19-20 that James is concerned about, hypothetically, is a Christian who has gone into sin." Now, this too would fit with James' emphasis. Over and over again, throughout the flow his letter he's warned Christians about sin in their lives and the need to deal with it. So that could be his emphasis.

But let me suggest a third approach. Everybody agrees that the sinning person in these is a professing believer. Everybody agrees with that. In other words, what we have here is a person who claims to be a Christian, no question, and somebody who has associated himself with the church. It says, “if anyone among you strays.”

But we don't know and, in fact, and this is the key, we cannot know the true spiritual condition of others. I can't look into your heart and tell you, “yes, you're a Christian,” or, “no, you're not.” I can give you the Biblical criteria to evaluate your own heart. I can urge you to examine yourself as Paul does in 2 Corinthians 13 to see whether or not you're in the faith, but I cannot categorically declare you to be a part of the kingdom of God or not a part of the kingdom of God if you understand the true gospel and claim to embrace the true gospel. And so, whether the person is a genuine believer or simply a professing believer who's not, doesn't really matter. Our response is the same. So, in other words, James is writing all of the churches where the people from his own congregation had fled in the persecution and as he writes to these churches, he says, “my brethren, if anyone among you” - that is, any professing Christian who has attached himself to the church there, if that person - “strays from the truth.”

You know, that is a common Biblical image. In fact, scripture often uses the image of a path or a road to describe the life of obedience to the Lord. You remember Psalm 1 as the Psalm, as the Book of Psalms begins, the Psalmist lays out for us the reality that in life, it's this simple: there are only two ways, two paths, and you are on one or the other. You're either on the path of the godly and the righteous or you're on the path of the wicked. That's it. You're on one or the other.

So, this image of a path is a common one. The Psalm we learned as children, Psalm 23, “the LORD is our Shepherd.” He leads us, what? “In the paths of righteousness.” Our Lord spoke of the Christian life as the way of the narrow path, the narrow way. So, this is a common Biblical image. In fact, Ezekiel in that promise of the new covenant in Ezekiel 36, God says, “I will put My Spirit within you and I will cause you to walk in My statutes.” In other words, “I'm going to cause you to walk in My path, in My ways.”

So, it makes perfect sense, then, that in the scripture, “straying from the path,” is a very familiar way to describe human sin. You remember Isaiah 53:6, speaking of the condition of all unsaved mankind, “all we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned each one to his own way.” Psalm 119:176, “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant for I do not forget your commandments.” You know what amazes me about that verse? That’s verse 176 of Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is an ode to the beauty and power of the word of God. Almost every verse mentions the scripture as the psalmist interacts with how the scripture has changed his life and yet, when he comes to the very end of his Psalm, this magnificent piece of poetry about the power, the beauty of scripture, what does he say? He says, “I have gone astray like a lost sheep.” You know what he’s saying? Even those who are familiar with scripture can still stray from it. Don't you, for a moment, believe that because you have a lot of knowledge that you aren't capable of straying. What did Paul say to the Corinthians? “Let him who thinks he stands” – what? – “take heed lest he fall.”

Now, how is it that a believer, strays? I really enjoyed my study this week. I looked into a number of passages dealt with that. I thought about bringing it to you this morning but, honestly, I don't have the time in this message to do that. But let me give you the core reason, the foundational reason.

Turn back to James 1. James himself identifies for us the main reason, the ultimate foundational reason, we stray from the path of righteousness. Here it is, James 1:13.

Let no one say when he is, tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own cravings.

Those cravings that are part of our fallenness.

And when this craving has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

Now, how does this happen? Look at verse 16, “Do not be deceived my beloved brethren.” See the word “deceived?” That is same word as our word “straying” in chapter 5. He’s saying, don’t let yourself be led astray. Now, how would we be led astray? Look at the next verse, verse 17. Don’t be led astray, “every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of lights.” You see, there are a lot of different reasons that we stray from the path to righteousness but here is the core foundational reason: we lose sight of the truth about God. We convince ourselves that God is withholding something from us that we desperately need, and we would be happy if we had. But instead, James says, listen, don’t let your heart lead you astray. Your heart will lead you astray if you listen to it. It’ll convince you something that isn’t true about God. He says, let me tell you that every good thing and every perfect gift comes down from God. Don’t believe the lie that there is happiness, and fulfillment, and joy found outside of God and His ways.

That’s the ultimate reason to stray. It’s because we’re thinking wrongly about who God is. Every time – let me say it this way – every time you and I choose to sin, we have a flawed view of who God is. I’m not talking about your theology that you have written down somewhere. I’m talking about real theology, what you really believe because behavior always betrays belief.

So, it’s possible for us all to stray and you and I are to be alert, not only to our own straying, but to the straying of others. We’re to recognize when a brother or sister strays from the truth. According to James, it’s your duty and mine to be alert to the signs of spiritual danger in the lives of others.

We’re really in this to copy the heart of Christ himself. Turn back to Matthew 18 because here we get a glimpse into the heart of our Lord to those who leave the path.

In Matthew 18, Jesus is instructing His disciple about basic principles of life in the kingdom, of life in the church.

Verse 6, He defines for us, “the little ones,” that He mentions throughout this passage. He used, initially, a child as an illustration but the He changes. Verse 6, “Whoever causes one of these

little ones” – and He may have been, some of those children may have been in Christ as well, but He's also using that to broaden that to describe every believer – “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble.” So now we're talking about not all children but all those who believe. Now, notice verse 12. In that context, Jesus says this - and this just opens up His heart to us - He says, “What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray.” Here it is, here's that image again. “Does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains, and go and search for the one that is straying? If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. So, it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.”

When I was growing up, most often the metaphor, the image of one straying sheep was used to represent somebody who was lost and, certainly, the image of a lost soul is used this way, even in Isaiah 53, “all we like sheep have gone astray.” But in this context Jesus is describing not an unbeliever who needs to be saved but a believer who has strayed from the path. And notice the heart of Christ. He says, “doesn't it just make sense that I would want to go seek out that one who has strayed?” He says, “I love them. I'm concerned about that one. I don't just think about My fold, I think of individuals within My fold.” And that's how you and I are to think as well. We're to recognize a straying brother. So, the first part of our mandate is clear recognize a straying brother.

The second part of the mandate is: attempt a spiritual rescue.

Back in James 5:19, James adds. “and one turns him back.” So, there's a straying brother but then there's another brother who turns him back. That's a familiar Old Testament expression, “to turn,” or, “to turn back.” It's often used for repentance. For example, in Deuteronomy 30 as Moses talks to the people of Israel on the verge of the Promised Land, he tells them that if they disobey God, they're going to invite the curses that have been recited. And he says this in Deuteronomy 30:1, “so it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I've set before you, and you shall call them to mind and all the nations where the LORD your God has banished you.” He says, listen, you disobey God, He's going to bring the curses and part of the curses is He's going to banish you from the land. He's going to drive you

out of your land. You're going to find yourself in captivity. But, if that happens, and “you call them to mind in the nations which the LORD your God has banished you.” Verse 2,

and you return to the Lord your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I have commanded you today, you and your sons, then the Lord your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you

“To turn” in Old Testament terminology is to repent. And you can see the picture of it. Here’s a person who is on his own way doing what he wants, and he turns from that path to the path of God. So, it’s a picture of repentance.

Now, when you come to the New Testament, it can refer to a couple of kinds of repentance. It can refer to – this turning - the repentance that accompanies salvation, that initial turning when you and I absolutely like sheep were gone astray and we turned back to God through the work of His grace. It can describe that. In fact, eight times in Acts it’s used just that way. Let me just show you a couple of them. Turn to Acts 26. In the ministry of the apostles, they often speak of turning to the Lord as a reflection of true salvation, of the repentance that accompanies, true salvation. Acts 26 and notice verse 18. Paul, as he recounts the mission God gave him or Christ gave him on the road to Damascus, he says, here's what Christ told me. Acts 26:18 “to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, and they may turn from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.’ You see, “turning,” in this context, is the repentance that accompanies genuine saving faith and that happens at the moment of salvation. You see it again in verse 20, he said so King Agrippa

I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring to those in Damascus first, and in Jerusalem, and then all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

So, this was the message of the apostles. This was the heart of salvation. Turn. Turn from your way to God and His ways. Turn from your sin. It's repentance.

In 1Thessalonians 1:9. Paul says that the Thessalonians turned from idols to serve the living and true God. If you're a Christian this morning, there was a point in time when you turned from your way to God.

But this expression, "to turn," also is used in the New Testament to refer to the repentance of believers. Let me just show you one example. Turn to Luke 22. Our Lord actually gives it in His words to Peter just before the betrayal, Luke 22:32. In verse 31, He says, "'Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you'" - Jesus says to Peter - "'that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again'" - when you've repented, Peter, of betraying Me - then you're to "'strengthen your brothers.'"

So here it's obviously used in the life of believer who enters into a pattern of sin, as Peter did that night, and then he turns from that sin back to God. This is what you and I are to seek to accomplish. We're to attempt a spiritual rescue. We are to turn our sinning brother back.

Now, how exactly are we to carry out this rescue? Well, it's hinted at in James 5:20. He who "turns a sinner from the error of his way." Here's the picture: a brother or sister of ours has left the Lord's way, the Lord's path, the path of righteousness and obedience to pursue his own way. And in so doing he has become, as James says, a sinner. Our responsibility, your responsibility if you know that person, is to try to convince that person of his or her sin, to urge them to repent, to leave their own way and to get back on God's way, God's path in obedience to Christ.

Now you say, "how? I mean, how can we be an instrument in the Lord's hands to turn someone back to obedience and righteousness? How can I really attempt this rescue? What do I do?"

Well, James doesn't really tell us how, but our Lord does. Turn back to Matthew 18. Here's exactly how you're to attempt the spiritual rescue.

Right after verses 12-14, when Jesus tells us just how important it is to go rescue that straying believer, He tells us how, verse 15, and as He does so, He lays out a four-step process. And I'm not going to spend a lot of time here because I've taught through this passage. If you weren't here when I did that, I urge you to listen online or get the CD because this passage is absolutely foundational to our responsibility to each other and even life in the church.

But here in Matthew 18:15 and following Jesus lays down a four-step process. Let me briefly take you through them or remind you of them. "If your brother sins" - there's the same context as James 5 - any sins, here's step number one: "go and show him his fault in private." If you become aware that a fellow Christian, someone who professes Christ, is sinning or, in James' words, has strayed from the truth, then you have a responsibility to go to that person privately. That's the first step.

What do you do? Well, you tell them what you know or what you've observed. You say, "I'm not sure but here's what I've observed. Here's what I think's going on. I'm concerned about you. Why are you making these choices? I urge you to turn from your own way of sin you've chosen to pursue God and His way, to live in obedience to Christ."

Verse 15, "if he listens to you, you have won your brother." The rescue's accomplished at the first step.

However, verse 16, "but if he does not listen to you" - here's Step 2 - "take one or two more with you so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed."

The second step is to go back to that person but this time, don't go alone. Take one or two more with you so they can serve as witnesses, not the original sin, necessarily, but of the confrontation, of your urging them to leave that sin.

Verse 17, "if he refuses to listen to them" - here's Step 3 - "tell it to the church." At this point, obviously, the elders would have to become involved. They investigate it. They listen to the evidence as well. They consider it. And if everything is as it appears, then they bring it to the

church. I would typically do this in the context of our communion service, share with you that there's person whom we love, who's a part of us, who has chosen a path of sin and we all who know that person need to go to them, not to humiliate them, but rather to restore them, to urge them, to come back to the way of God.

Verse 17, Jesus lays down a fourth step. "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and tax collector." In the New Testament times, in the New Testament church, that was absolutely clear. That meant, "put him out of the church." Don't let it be as part of the church. Those are the four steps. I didn't make that up. That's what Jesus says. If your brother sins, that's how you're to respond. That's the rescue. That's the process. That's how the search and rescue mission is to be carried out.

Now, before I leave this point, let me remind you that our attitude in doing this is absolutely crucial.

You know, there's some people who love to confront other people with their sins. They're brutal. They're harsh. They don't care about the person. They come in almost with a machete into another person's life hacking everything up they see. That's not the right attitude. Our attitude is absolutely crucial. Let me give you four attitudes that must be a part of this process if you're going to carry out what Jesus urges in Matthew 18. Very briefly, four attitudes you must have.

Number one: genuine love for the person. Genuine concern for that person. Remember Matthew 18:12-14? That shepherd's heart that sees one sheep that's strayed and loves that sheep and wants to go rescue it from the danger it's in? That's the heart we're to have. We're to be genuinely concerned about the person. That's why 2 Thessalonians 3:15 says, when you go on this process of discipline, when you go on this process of rescue, don't, "regard that person as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."

A second attitude we must have in the process is an eagerness to forgive. Right after Matthew 18 in that process – the four-step process we just looked at - Peter, always the one to speak up says, "wait a minute, how many times, Lord, am I supposed to forgive my brother? Seven times?"

Jesus says, “no, but I’ll tell you what, seventy times seven.” You know what Jesus was saying to Peter? When you go into this process, don’t go slow to forgive, be eager to forgive where there’s true repentance.

Turn to Galatians 6. Here Paul gives us two more attitudes that must be part of this process. Galatians 6:1, “brethren, even if anyone is caught in a trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one” - there's the real purpose, it's not to humiliate the person, it's to restore them but you're to do it, notice how – “in a spirit of gentleness.” There's our third attitude that must be a part of this process: gentleness. Again, some people are harsh, and unloving, and uncaring. They're brutal with the people they deal with. That's contrary to the spirit of Scripture. There's to be a gentleness.

And then the fourth attitude, he says, “each one of you looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” That's humility. That's the fourth attitude: humility. Look to yourself. In other words, this is not the spirit - when you go to someone, it isn't - the spirit of, “how could you?” Instead, it's the spirit of, “I understand because I know my own sin, but I urge you to leave it.

In fact, our Lord tells us that if we're going to go confront someone with their sin, we have to first, what? Deal with our own. Matthew 7. Jesus says, “look, before you go try to get the speck out of somebody else's eye, get the log out of your own eye.” Deal with your own sin before you try go help someone else with the sin in their lives.

If you claim to be a Christian, let me ask you, is this how you have responded when you knew a fellow Christian was in spiritual danger? When they had strayed from the path? In fact, let me be more specific. Right now, do you know a professing believer who is headed towards serious spiritual danger? Do you personally know someone who has strayed from the path of righteousness? Do you know or suspect that someone in your circle of believers has chosen a path of sin or is about to choose a path of sin? then you must attempt a search and rescue operation. You say, “wait a minute. What you're talking about is really uncomfortable. It's difficult.” Yes, it is. It's not something I or anyone else enjoys. You say, “well, you don't know this person. I think I'd just be wasting my time. I don't think they'll respond.” Maybe they won't.

In fact, it may permanently damage your relationship. But what's more important: the spiritual welfare of that person or a temporal friendship we enjoy here on earth? You have a command from your Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot disregard it. You have a command from James and from our Lord Himself in Matthew 18. We have no options. If we recognize a straying brother, we must attempt a rescue. This is like so many other things in the Christian life. The Christian life is a life of faith. That means we trust God even when it doesn't make sense to us. You may have another plan that you think will work better but this is Christ's plan and faith is trusting Him more than ourselves.

If you need any further encouragement to act, let's look at the third part of James' mandate because in the third part of his mandate, he tells us to consider the serious consequences.

Verse 20, "let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." If you recognize a straying brother and if you attempt a spiritual rescue, these are the consequences that could come. Notice what he says, "let him know." This is, by the way, a subtle way of issuing a command. James is saying, "this isn't an option because of how high the stakes are." And James urges each of us is to think about what's at stake if we act and what's at stake if we don't. You see, once we really understand the serious consequences, it should motivate us to go to a sinning brother or sister regardless of how awkward, or how difficult, or how we think they're going to respond. Let's look at the serious consequences of acting.

Number one: he will, "save his soul from death." Wow. By the way, the pronoun, "his," here, is referring to the sinning brother, not to the person attempting the rescue. Perhaps you're thinking, "now, wait a minute. I thought God saves. How can I save someone else?" Well, it is true that only God can save, but on several occasions in the New Testament, the word, "saved," has a human subject just as it does here. Here's the point: God does the saving, but we can be an instrument in the Redeemer's hands to affect the rescue of someone else. You see, if the person that you pursue is really not a Christian, they're simply a professing Christian, then you have been an instrument in God's hands to rescue that person from eternal, everlasting death and if the sinning person in the church that you go after is a believer, then you have rescued him from divine chastening that could include serious illness, as in James 5 or in 1 Corinthians 11:30, it

could even include physical death. You have rescued him, literally, from death. In James 1:15, you remember what we read just a few moments ago, James says, the sin, when it is accomplished, when it comes to full growth in the life, what does it produce? Death. So, by stopping that pattern of sin, by rescuing someone from that, you keep them from the destruction that comes with sin at its end.

There's a second positive consequences in verse 20. "You will cover a multitude of sins." Again, this is not about the sins of the person confronting, this is about the sins of the person who is being confronted. "You will cover a multitude of sins." You see, by turning this person back to righteousness we'll be ensuring that the multitude of their sins are covered. Now, what does that mean? Well, at first blush, it seems to be saying the same thing as Proverbs 10:12 and 1 Peter 4:8 which says, "love covers a multitude of sins." Both of those verses are describing the power of love to overlook personal wrongs. That's absolutely true that if you and I truly have love, then we are able to overlook the personal wrongs against us, if we love another person. That's not what James is saying. James 5:20 is saying something entirely different. The Greek word here that is translated as, "cover," is used frequently in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, to mean, "to forgive, to cause to be forgiven, to pardon."

In fact, turn back to Psalm 32:1, this familiar Psalm of David. In the Septuagint, it uses the same word as in our text in James 5. "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!" You see, what verse 20 of James 5 is talking about is divine forgiveness. In fact, turn over to Psalm 85. You see the same word used again and here it's defined for us. Psalm 85:2, "You forgave the iniquity of your people; You covered all their sin." Because of the nature of Hebrew poetry, because it's parallelism instead of rhyming at the end like our poetry, basically, "forgive," and, "covered," are synonyms. So, to, "cover the multitude of their sins," in James 5, is to forgive their sins. What an amazing promise. If you go after someone and you rescue them from the path, they're on, they get back on the path of righteousness, then you ensure that they enjoy the forgiveness of God. Not for a single sin, but for a multitude of sins. If you doubt that attempting to rescue a fellow professing believer's important, just consider the consequences. If he or she repents, you will have been used by God to accomplish that person's rescue - their

salvation from death - and you will ensure that they receive God's forgiveness and pardon. And if we really believed that we wouldn't hesitate to ask, would we?

Those are the positive consequences but for just a moment, consider the negative consequences of not acting. Logically, if we fail to act, if we fail to go on the rescue mission then the opposite of verse 20 may become a reality. We allow that person to be exposed to death – either divine chastening or our eternal death. And, secondly, we leave that person in sin without the enjoyment of God's forgiveness. Consider the serious consequences of acting and of not acting.

So, James concludes his letter with a call for us to go on rescue to those who stray from the truth. We have an obligation not just to ourselves but to all those around us. You know, a question I had to ask myself as I studied this passage and you should be asking is, why would James end his letter with this message? At face value, it seems like an abrupt ending, doesn't it? And yet, I think if we ask that question and answer it, we find the application for us beyond even the specifics of confronting a brother or sister in Christ. I think in these closing versus James intends to give us several things.

First of all, I think he intends to give us a word of encouragement. A word of encouragement about mutual care and concern for each other. You see you and I tend by nature to be selfish and just to think about ourselves. When we think about our spiritual lives, we think about ourselves. When's the last time you prayed about someone else's spiritual life. See we tend to be innately selfish, and James is reminding us here and encouraging us to remember that we have a mutual care for each other. Not only are we supposed to obey the commands he's laid out in this book, but we should have a concern for others as well.

I think, secondly, there's a word of warning - not only a word of encouragement, but a word of warning. The warning is this: any one of us is susceptible to stray from the truth. Don't for a moment imagine that you can't stray from the path righteousness. Any one of us can. Be on guard. This is a very real possibility.

Number three, I think James is giving us in these last two verses a word of exhortation - a word of exhortation specifically to live and serve in the light of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He's reminding us here that we are not to take our sin or anyone else's sin lightly. It's a terrible, devastating thing. Sin is a vicious animal that if you feed it, it will destroy you.

And I think, finally, and this is where the encouragement to me and I trust it will be to you as well, James gives us in these last two verses of word of grace. As we've gone through this letter, I don't know about you, but I've felt a bit bruised and battered. James has held an extremely high standard throughout his entire letter. Yet here at the end, you see the gracious side of James because he acknowledges the reality and the possibility of sin. Even true believers can stray. And when they return, when they repent and come back to God - either self-initiated as we saw in James 5:14-16, where the person under God's discipline calls the elders of the church is repentant or initiated by a fellow Christian as we've seen in these verses today - either way, when we come back to God, there is spiritual reclamation. There is pardon. The grace of God can cover a multitude of sins.

The same James that thunders, "obedience to Christ always follows true faith in Christ," the same James that reminds us in this conclusion is that there's always grace at the foot of the cross. There's a high standard, we must obey it. We must have it in our hearts to be on the path of righteousness, but when we stray from that path, if we genuinely are willing to leave our own path, and come back to our God, we will find Him open, and ready, and eager to forgive. He will cover, that is, He will forgive a multitude of sins. Listen, I don't know what's going on in your life today. I don't know what sins you're allowing either in your heart or perhaps even acting upon. I don't know how long it's gone on, but I'll tell you this: if you will return to your God, if you will turn from your sin to God, you will find Him gracious and ready to forgive and open arms accepting you to Himself. He will cover a multitude of sins.

One of my favorite verses is Isaiah 43:25. Listen to what God says. "I, even I, am the One who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins." Here's the grace and mercy of our God. That expression, "wipes out," I love that because that's a legal act. God erases the sins from our record. You see? You understand this? Every sin goes into the

Divine record - not one single exception. Not a momentary thought is outside the Divine record of your sins. And God's justice demands that they be paid for but in Christ God takes, as it were, the Divine eraser and He erases from the record, every one of those sins. He wipes them out. And then it says and, "I will not remember your sins." In other words, God says, "listen. I'm going to make a choice. I'm going to make a choice never to bring up to you again, your sins forever. That's the grace of our God and that's the grace that you will find if you will turn from your way, whatever that way is you've chosen and you will truly turn back to God.

So, James ends his letter with a word of grace the very last words in his letter remind us that for the repentant sinner God, in His grace, will cover a multitude of sins. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we are so grateful for this revelation of Yourself. Thank You that You are the One who wipes out our transgressions and who has promised not to remember them against us forever. Father, we thank You that You are a patient, that You are eager to forgive, that You are gracious, that You are slow to anger, that You are merciful, that You are compassionate. Lord, we thank You that You are all these things toward those who are willing to turn from their sin and their own way to You. Lord, thank You that you are eager to forgive and like the father of the prodigal when we're willing to leave the path we've chosen and return to You, You run to meet us. Father, I pray for the people in this room this morning. I pray for the Christian who has chosen a path of sin. - his own way, her own way - contemplating leaving Your way or perhaps already has, perhaps for a long time, Lord, I pray that today would be the day when they would see You for who You are a gracious, compassionate, merciful God who would receive them eagerly if they would turn from their sin to You. Father, I pray as well for the person here this morning, perhaps raised in this church raised in the church, perhaps part of this church but who really doesn't know You through Your Son who has a dead, non-saving faith. Lord. I pray that today would be the day that they would truly pour out their heart before You and seek Your forgiveness, when they would turn from their sins in true repentance and embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the grace that He brings through His death. Father, we pray that You would accomplish all of these things to magnify Your great Name as Savior, as Redeemer. For it's in the name of Jesus Christ that we pray and for His glory. Amen