

***“To Save a Soul from Death”***

November 25, 2012

Text: James 5:19-20

**Our text is the conclusion of the book of James (5:19-20)=>**

*“My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, / 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.”*

James is encouraging the believers to whom he’s writing (including us), to take some responsibility for one another’s spiritual wellbeing, by acting to correct those who have strayed from the truth.

**Frankly, it’s unlikely that most people in today’s churches would actually do that, for several reasons=>**

1) Modern thinking does not view truth as the Apostles did.

The writers of Scripture would never have said things like,

“We mustn’t impose our views of truth on others who have different views about it that are just as good.”

They didn’t trifle w/ revealed Truth like that, because they actually believed in it, & believed they understood it well enough to condemn as deadly error, ideas that contradicted it.

2) Privacy has become so sacrosanct today, and certain forms of marketing (esp. telemarketing) have become so invasive, that any insertion of ourselves into others’ lives (even if done tactfully, lovingly, & w/ pure intentions) would likely be viewed as intrusive/offensive violations of their privacy.

3) Many Xns, frankly, don't care enough about other Xns to bother trying to turn them back from their spiritual errors. They're glad others want to be left alone, because they don't want to get involved w/ them anyway. They're fixated on themselves, utterly indifferent to others. They find even having to listen to anyone else boring. You wonder if they've become so hardened w/ indifference that they could actually watch another human, being lowered into the horrors of hell, & feel nothing.

**If we are going to take James' words in our text seriously enough to act on them, we must overcome/counter all these contemporary attitudes/tendencies w/i our own hearts/lives.**

- \* We must study the truth till we're so convinced/confident we understand it, that we will act boldly/obediently on that understanding.
- \* We must place the dictates of Scripture ahead of our society's dictates about privacy, while still remaining tactful and respectful of other people's rights.
- \*\* We must learn to love other Xns, becoming so close to them and concerned about their spiritual wellbeing, that we'll risk being rebuffed, in order to minister to them.

**In the scenario James describes in today's text, there are 3 key elements=> a Roamer, a Rescuer, & Rewards.**

## **\* The Roamer**

**[James 5:19a]**=> “*My brethren, if any among you **strays** from the truth,*”

### **Who exactly is this person who strays/roams from the truth?**

1<sup>st</sup>, he is a member of the congregation—someone “*among you,*” who has been considered one of the “*brethren.*”

He has attended our church, we know him, & we thought of him as a Xn, just like ourselves.

But 2<sup>nd</sup>, he has strayed “*from the truth*” of God’s Word, and specifically the truth of the gospel.

He hasn’t suddenly rejected it.

He has just gradually wandered away from it.

This sad individual has come to either disbelieve/disregard some essential doctrine of truth in God’s Word.

Someone, or some event (or series of events), may have caused him to wander away from the truth.

\* It might have been a false-teacher or even a secular teacher.

\* It might have been circumstances in his life by which Satan gradually persuaded him to doubt God’s goodness/love (as he did Eve).

\* It might simply have been a preoccupation w/ other things that caused him to neglect prayer, Bible reading, and his gathering w/ believers for worship/fellowship/prayer.

E.g. Jesus described people in whom the gospel is  
choked out by the worries of the world & the  
deceitfulness of riches (Mt 13:22).

They never fully believed in the gospel, so when  
other things became priorities in their lives,  
they strayed away.

Regardless of the specifics of the case, James' point to us, is that  
it's our business (yours/mine) to bring the prodigal back  
home, making glad the heart of his/our Heavenly Father.  
Whoever he/she may be, if you know a person like this,  
weep over the terrible eternal doom he faces, because  
it's so tragic, and go after him to bring him back.

**It's unclear from the grammar whether this wanderer has  
roamed away because someone else has lead him astray;  
Or whether he has gone astray of his own accord, like a  
sheep nibbling on grass, who forgets where he is,  
so he gets lost.**

And ultimately it doesn't matter, whether he was self-led,  
or led astray by others.

What does matter is that he has strayed from the truth, and  
spiritually speaking, he is in serious danger.

This roaming wanderer-from-truth, has fallen into sinful activities  
a/w/a doctrinal error;

So verse 20 refers to=> "*the error of his way.*"

The one always/inevitably leads to the other.

You cannot stray away from doctrinal truth w/o straying  
from practical righteousness as well.

As you think less of X, you have less incentive for obeying  
Him as your Lord, so sin will follow close behind.

Unholy-thinking invariably produces unholy-living.

**Unbiblical faith/behavior are outward realities that identify  
this person; but is he saved, or unsaved?**

It's often difficult for us to be sure about that, esp. at first.

\* It's possible that such a man is born-again, but has become  
confused.

He might be a new believer, or he might have come under  
some unbiblical influence, & has developed a faulty  
belief-system that has led to a sinful lifestyle as well.

If we don't leave this possibility open, then we might  
quickly label as "unsaved" anyone who ever sins at  
all, or who doesn't agree w/ us on every theological  
detail.

He might be a David, who needs a Nathan to lovingly  
confront his sin & help turn his life back around.

Like David, he has undoubtedly lost the vitality/assurance  
of his relationship w/ God, even if he really is saved.

He needs a shepherd who will leave his other 99 sheep, &  
go in search in the mountains for this 1 stray who has  
lost his way (Mt 18:12).

\* But James prepares us for the worst possible scenario, by calling him a “*sinner*” in verse 20, which refers to an unsaved person.

“*Sinner*” is a term never used in the NT of true believers—  
always/only of unbelievers=>

\* E.g. Jesus said=> “*I did not come to call the righteous, but **sinner**s*” (Mt 9:13).

\* Lk 15:7=> “*There will be more joy in heaven over one **sinner** who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*”

\* Rom 5:8=> “*God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet **sinner**s, Christ died for us.*”

So this man is very probably unsaved, and could even be a tare among the wheat sown by Satan in the Church.

Throughout redemptive history, including the Church age there have always been false “believers” whom Isaiah described as giving God lip service, but removing their hearts far from Him (Isa 29:13).

The man in our text may sincerely believe himself to be a Xn, but tragically, his faith is what James 2:17 calls “dead faith”;

He may be someone who mistakenly thinks he’s on the road leading to eternal life, but who is really on the broad road that leads only to death/destruction (Mt 7:13).

Most like, he is a person whose heart is like the hardened soil, the rocky soil, or the thorny soil in Jesus’ parable of the soils.

The seed of gospel truth has been planted in it, but has  
never taken root;

And now he's wandered away from the truth.

It's a wonderful thing to rescue the soul of someone who knows  
nothing of God's grace & is caught up in the destructive  
wilds of sin/corruption.

But it's an even greater joy to find the wandering sheep  
who once knew the peace/safety of X's fold (the  
church), & to carry him back to where loved ones are  
awaiting him.

This is the prodigal son who has discovered the hard way  
how ugly the world can be;

But now has come home.

**Far from using an accusatory tone, James addresses his  
readers w/ the Xn term of endearment, "*My brethren.*"**

This whole passage is bathed in loving tenderness/concern for the  
tragedy of a man who has turned his back on the truth.

And James himself exemplifies that concern, both in the  
content/tone of his final words in this epistle.

Believers are to be their brothers' keepers.

We're responsible for one another's spiritual welfare.

Heb 3=> *"Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any  
one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away  
from the living God. / But encourage one another day  
after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' lest any  
one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin"*  
(Heb 3:12-13).

I.e., guard one another from the ultimate spiritual tragedy  
of a hardened/hopeless heart.

**Happily, we come now to the hero of this sage=>**

**\* The Rescuer**

**[Verse 19b]=>** *“My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back,”*

**James describes the rescuer simply as “one [who] turns him [the wanderer] back.”**

This could be a pastor/elder, and if it is, he will have ample  
reason to rejoice when the wanderer returns home.

But it doesn't necessarily have to be a pastor/elder/church-leader  
at all.

James doesn't specify anyone in particular.

He is simply describing the corporate responsibility we all  
bear towards one another, as believers.

Anyone who truly loves his fellow believers should be involved  
in doing this.

And anyone who doesn't love others enough to fulfill this  
responsibility, should repent of his lack of love, praying  
that God will change his heart.

Gal 6 calls on those who are “*spiritual*” (living faithfully &  
obediently according to God's Word) to “*restore such a  
one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself,  
lest you too be tempted*” (Gal 6:1).

That, in part, is because reproving others is often a difficult  
task, esp. for the “unspiritual.”



And if we're dealing w/ unconfessed sin in our own life,  
it's impossible to do this w/o feeling guilty because  
of our hypocrisy.

But even then we can at least help seek for the restoration  
of wanderers/roamers from the truth, by praying for  
them, calling out to the Lord with tears/entreaties,  
that He would grant them repentance from their sins.

**Whenever we go to confront a wanderer, it must be done  
gently, graciously and w/ humility, not w/ an abrasive  
attitude of self-righteousness.**

If it's not done humbly, we can aggravate the situation, so that  
the wanderer digs himself deeper than ever into his sin,  
becoming openly & adamantly defiant, just because we  
have denounced him instead of reasoning with him, in love.

The believer who would be a rescuer must first examine his own  
heart for sin, then pray fervently that the H.S. will empower  
him to help turn this wanderer back to the way of truth.

He must go to this poor soul, with all the love in his heart,  
pleading w/ him for X's sake, to return.

If you're that wanderer yourself, let me plead w/ you, to return to  
the-Lord/the-truth.

**Chas. Spurgeon once told a story about an elder who spent all  
night in prayer, that the Lord would grant  
repentance/faith to a village blacksmith.**

In the morning he rode his horse to the man's shop, intending to share the gospel in great detail; but he couldn't get it out.

All he could do was take the blacksmith's powerful hand,

& say "Sir, I am deeply concerned about your salvation!  
I am deeply concerned about your salvation! I have been  
wrestling with God all this night for your salvation!"

He then rode off, and the smithy went into the house, where he told his wife, "If he is concerned about my salvation, it is a strange thing that I am not concerned about it."

He rode to the elder's house, & found him still in prayer.

Spurgeon=> "God gave him a contrite spirit and a broken heart and brought that poor sinner to the feet of the Savior!"

**If we are all obligated to seek the spiritual welfare of one another, we're doubly obligated, w/ regard to those who are closest to us, & over whom we exercise some influence.**

Most Xn parents long more than anyone else for the conversion of their own children, watching/waiting for it, just as the Prodigal Son's father kept watching for his son's return. Xn husbands long most deeply for the salvation of their unsaved wives, and Xn wives for their husbands.

**When we go to one who has strayed from the truth, what is it that we are seeking for-him/from-him? =>**

**To "*turn him back.*"**

This is a word that is sometimes translated "repent," and sometimes "convert."

It means to turn around, & go the opposite way.

Only once in the NT is it used of a believer, & that is Lk 22:32.

There Jesus tells Peter that He has prayed for him, that once he has “*turned again*” (repented of having forsaken & denied his Lord), he will strengthen his brothers.

In all 47 of the other NT occurrences of this word, it consistently refers to sinners, turning from their sin, to believe in Jesus X.

James’ point is this=> If any Christian discovers that someone claiming to be saved has fallen into error, he should set himself, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to bring that person back to the truth.

He should assume that person is not born again, even if he himself thinks that he is.

Do unto others what you would have them do for you.

There is great joy in winning any sinner to the Lord.

There’s even greater joy in restoring one who once claimed to be a Xn, but who has somehow fallen away.

It is for these prodigals that the Father stands, watching.

### **\* The Rewards**

**James says absolutely nothing about rewards in this text.**

He doesn’t say that X will reward us at the Bema Seat Judgment for having turned someone, for whom He died, back to Him.

Nor does he say we will gain honor/respect for  
ourselves among our fellow believers, for  
having rescued a soul.

He doesn't even say we will gain the love of the  
person whose soul we have rescued from  
death/hell.

All of that is undoubtedly true, but James never  
mentions it.

Instead, he puts the significance of this whole spiritual victory  
in perspective, & simply lets us dwell on it and relish it, on  
our own.

And therein we find our reward.

[Verse 20]=> “*Let him **know** [let him think about it, let the  
monumental importance of it all sink deep into his heart so  
that he finds immense joy in it], 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.*”

**We honor firefighters, police officers, and others who risk  
their own safety to rescue people, who are in danger.**

E.g. the firefighters who died in the Twin Towers, trying to  
save those who were trapped on the upper floors.

But the saving of a soul is far greater and more significant than  
saving someone's life in this world.

It is saving him from eternal doom/death—second death.

It is giving him eternal life.

Someone: “We can’t save anybody’s soul from death—only God can.”

That’s absolutely true, but notice that those are the very words James does use in our text=> “**He** [the rescuer] *who turns a sinner from the error of his way **will save his soul** from death.*”

The same man who turns the sinner, saves his soul.

It’s as if God gives us credit for people’s salvation, even though they could not be saved w/o X’s atoning death for their sins, or w/o the H.S.’s washing/regeneration.

God doesn’t even need human rescuers at all, to save anyone’s soul.

He saved Abraham, & He saved Paul, w/o anyone else witnessing to them, just by speaking directly to them Himself.

One might think God would glorify Himself that way more often.

And yet God gets greater glory by using faulty clay instruments like us to do spiritual heart surgery on sinners.

Using the likes of us to save the lost, displays God’s amazing power to work miracles even under the handicap of flawed middle men.

What a tremendous privilege it is for us, to be used by Him in this way.

That is our reward=> knowing that somehow, the Lord has used the faithful efforts of seemingly useless instruments like us, to save people's souls from death, & to cover all their sins.

**The true significance of that comes clearly into focus when we consider what this word “death” actually means.**

The world says it simply means the end of our existence.

If they were right, death might not be so bad after all.

But God's Word says they are wrong—dangerously wrong.

Death in Scripture always refers to some unfortunate form of separation.

E.g. Biological death is separation of the body from the soul, breaking up human nature into its constituent parts.

But the Bible speaks of something it calls “second death,” which is the eternal separation of man (the being created in God's image) from God (whose image he bears).

This is a very unnatural/traumatic separation/isolation of a creature from his Source of life.

The Apostle Paul referred to this fatal separation as=> *“The penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power”* (II Thes 1:9).

So “2<sup>nd</sup> death” is not annihilation of the soul, but eternal destruction of the whole man.

Other passages of Scripture use death-terminology that is so terrible, it makes your skin crawl=>

- \* Mk 9=> *“THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED”* (9:48).
- \* Isa 2=> *“The terror of the LORD”* (Isa 2:19).
- \* Psa 50=> *“being torn in pieces”* (50:22).
- \* Rev 14=> *“the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; & they have no rest day & night”* (14:11).
- \* Rev 9=> *“Smoke went up out of the pit, like the smoke of a great furnace”* (9:2).

**Our great reward/joy is that, in God’s hands, we can save spiritually wandering souls from such a terrible destiny.**

If out of indifference, we allow them to go there w/o even a warning, we should be made to watch them go, and bear the suffocating remorse we would inevitably feel for our failure to act.

When we rescue someone lost in sin, we save his soul from eternal death.

Not only that, we introduce him/her to eternal life—an existence in which God develops all our faculties to experience the fullness, of the joy, of life in His presence.

Another soul will forever sing his Savior’s praises, rewarding Him for the price X paid, to redeem him from sin.

Although salvation is God’s work, He has allowed us to be what Paul called *“God’s fellow workers”* (I Cor 3:9).

**James also mentions another result of our turning a sinner from the error of his way—we cover a multitude of sins.**

This too is part of our reward.

I think the best way to explain what that means, is to remind you of the Ark of the Covenant in the OT.

It was a gold-covered box that contained the 2 tablets of the Law.

On the cover of this box there were golden statues of 2 angels facing each other, with the tips of their wings meeting/touching, at a point above their heads.

The Shekinah glory of God hovered between the statues, probably having the appearance of a point of light that was so intense/brilliant that it would have made a welder's torch look like a birthday candle.

In Ex 25:22 God had told Moses=> *“There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat [the cover on the Ark], from between the two cherubim [those 2 angels] which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you.”*

That “*mercy seat*” over the Ark was where God agreed to meet/speak w/ man, that point between the 2 angel statues.

But there was a problem built right into its design.

God was meeting man directly over the Law, which was housed w/i the Ark, and which condemned man for his sinfulness, showing how far he fell short of God's glory.

The Law demanded the death of sinners, so how was sinful man to draw near to God, if it also meant drawing near to the Law, becoming condemned by God's morally perfect Law, and therefore exposed to God's wrath?



In the OT, this problem was resolved by the death of a lamb that was a substitute sacrifice for man's sin, as the lamb's blood was sprinkled on the Ark, covering God/man's meeting place w/ blood.

That meant God's wrath had been satisfied (or "propitiated") on a substitute represented by that lamb, so God had forgiven the man's sins, covering them too w/ the lamb's blood.

This de-fused the Law, the blood having proven that a death had fulfilled its death-penalty for sin.

The blood *covered* the Law, protecting man from getting caught between its demands, & the glory of God's wrath over man's sin.

**All of this was an object lesson teaching believers the great principle of "propitiation thru a substitute sacrifice."**

Then Jesus came to earth to fulfill that principle, taking God's wrath over our sin upon Himself, as He died as our Substitute on the cross, shedding His blood.

In the words of Rom 3=> "*God displayed [X] publicly as a **propitiation** in His blood through **faith***" (3:25).

When we place our faith in Jesus X, it's as if we were sprinkled w/ X's blood, the same way the Ark of the Covenant was sprinkled w/ lamb's blood.

Our sins are forgiven/covered-up, & the Law's demand for our death due to our sin, has been called off.

We can now meet w/ God in X the way Moses did at the Ark of the Covenant, in the OT no longer fearful of God's wrath/glory.

As Heb 4 puts it=> *"Let us therefore **draw near** with **confidence** to the **throne of grace**, that we may receive **mercy** and may find **grace** to help in time of need"* (Heb 4:16).

**So James says to us=> "Let him know [the rescuer] that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way... will cover a multitude of sins"** (his sins).

There's our reward=> Not only have we saved his soul from the horrors of death, we've covered his sin w/ Jesus' blood, so that God has forgiven it altogether, and he's no longer in danger of condemnation/hell/God's-wrath.

It's a wonderful thing for a mother to give life to a child, but even more wonderful to give eternal life to a soul;

Life that is eternally full, & absolutely free of guilt.

James says this individual was guilty of a *"multitude of sins,"* but now they no longer exist from God's p.o.v.

They have all been forgiven, as if cast to the bottom of the sea, and forever forgotten.

James speaks here of saving only 1 soul, but what a great joy it would be, to know, that you have turned 1 wanderer, back to the truth, & saved his soul from death!

May the H.S. cause each 1 of us, to take this truth to heart.

## ***“To Save a Soul from Death”***

November 25, 2012

Text: James 5:19-20

1. James is encouraging believers to take some responsibility for one another's spiritual wellbeing by acting to [16 correct] those who have strayed from the truth.

Jms 5:19-20

**In the scenario James describes in today's text, there are three key elements...**

### **\* The Roamer**

#### **[James 5:19a]**

2. Who exactly is this person who strays and roams from the truth? He is a member of the congregation, and he has strayed from the truth of God's [10 Word].
3. This roaming wanderer from truth has fallen into sinful activities as well as [20 doctrinal] error.
4. James prepares us for the worst possible scenario by calling him a sinner, a term [12 never] used in the NT of true believers.
5. Believers are to be their brothers' [16 keepers].

Mt 13:22

Mt 18:12

Mt 9:13; Lk 15:7; Rom 5:8; Isa 29:13; Jms 2:17; Mt 7:13

Heb 3:12-13

### **\* The Rescuer**

#### **[Verse 19b]**

6. Anyone who truly loves his fellow believers should be doing this; and anyone who doesn't love others should repent of his [10 lack] of love.
7. The believer who would be a rescuer must first examine his own heart for sin, then pray fervently that the Holy Spirit will [16 empower] him to help turn this wanderer back to the way of truth.

Gal 6:1

Lk 22:32

8. If any Christian discovers that someone claiming to be saved has fallen into error, he should set himself, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to bring that person [10 back] to the truth.

\* **The Rewards**

**[Verse 20]**

9. The saving of a soul is far greater and more significant than saving someone's [10 life] in this world.
10. That is our reward: knowing that the Lord has used useless instruments like us to [10 save] people's souls from death and to cover all their sins.  
II Thes 1:9; Mk 9:48; Isa 2:19; Psa 50:22; Rev 14:11; Rev 9:2
11. Our great reward and joy is that in God's hands we can save spiritually wandering souls from a [18 terrible] destiny.  
I Cor 3:9
12. James also mentions another result of our turning a sinner from the error of his way—we [12 cover] a multitude of sins.  
Ex 25:22; Rom 3:25
13. When we place our faith in Jesus Christ, it's as if we were sprinkled with Christ's blood; our sins are [18 forgiven] and covered.  
Heb 4:16
14. James speaks here of saving only one soul, but what a great [8 joy] it would be to know that you have turned one wanderer back to the truth and saved his soul from death!