

HIS WAY SHALL SAVE A SOUL

JAMES 5:19-20

Text: James 5:20

James 5:20

²⁰ Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.

Introduction:

I read recently about some research taking place at Texas A & M and Stanford Universities. They are working on a new generation of what are known as Rescue Robots.

Rescue Robots are used to get to people who are trapped in the wake of earthquakes and other disasters, when search and rescue teams are unable to reach them.

The engineers from the two universities have already created a prototype rescue robot that they call the “survivor buddy”. The robot can access the web, provide two-way video conferencing, and play music, among other things.

Natural disasters are not the only time that search and rescue work is needed. In fact, as James finishes his letter, he points us to the need for spiritual search and rescue.

In verse 19 James describes a scenario in which someone errs from the truth and strays from that which is right.

Rather than letting that erring person continue in their dangerous path, James encourages us to go on a search and rescue mission after them, and seek to restore them to where they should be.

The U.S. Army Ranger creed says, “I will never leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy...” That should be the motto of the Church as well.

Consider with me some things that James teaches us in this text about our responsibility to go after those who have gone astray. First of all, James reminds us that:

1. WE SHOULD BE CONSCIOUS OF THE POTENTIAL TO STRAY

James 5:19

¹⁹ Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him;

The overall point of this text is the recovery of those who “err from the truth.” However, in calling us to go after those who stray, James reminds that is absolutely possible for some among us to stray.

No matter how strong you may feel you are; no matter how committed to Christ you may seem to be, all of us should heed the words of 1 Corinthians 10:12.

1 Corinthians 10:12

¹² Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.

We must consider the sobering possibility that there could come a day when we are the straying one that James describes in this text.

Think with me about the potential there is for us to stray, and consider:

A. The Process Involved In This Erring

James raises the possibility of someone among us “err(ing) from the truth”. The word translated “err” in this passage means to go astray; to deviate from a prescribed path.

The Lord used the same word in Matthew 18:12 to describe a sheep that wanders off from the flock, and has to be pursued by the shepherd.

James is talking about someone who gets off course from that which is right.

This erring from the truth may happen in a couple of ways.

- For one, someone among us might wander from the truth in ***principle***.

In other words, a person may begin to deny certain truths they once believed. For instance, someone might say that they no longer believe the Bible to be the infallible Word of God. That is erring from the truth in principle.

- Also, this erring from truth could be in ***practice***.

In other words, a person may not openly deny the truth of Scripture, but in their daily practice they no longer live as if those things are true.

B. The Person Indicted In This Erring

James 5:19

¹⁹ Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him;

This wayward, wandering person in verse 19 is someone who strayed out from among the brethren – those who belong to Christ.

Think about that. This one who errs from the truth was once standing alongside other Christians in the truth. There was a time when this straying soul appeared to be a strong saint.

They used to sing in the choir. They used to teach a Sunday school class. They used to come to prayer meeting. Now, their names are mentioned at prayer meeting.

The truth that ought to get our attention is that this person James is describing was at one time just like most of us. That means that it is possible that some of us could one day be just like them.

Hebrews 2:1

¹ Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let *them* slip.

Revelation 2:25

²⁵ But that which ye have *already* hold fast till I come.

Don't think that you will never be the one who wanders from the truth. We should all be mindful of the songwriter's confession:

Prone to wander, Lord I feel it,

Prone to leave the God I love.

In this passage, James teaches us not only that we should be conscious of the potential to stray, but in looking closely at these verses, notice also secondly that:

2. WE SHOULD BE CLEAR ABOUT THE PERIL OF STRAYING

James 5:19

¹⁹ Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him;

James ends verse 19 with the phrase, "...and one convert him;" that is, if one were able to bring back the person who goes astray.

While it is not the main point James is trying to make in the passage, in this verse he reveals to us the danger that accompanies the erring from the truth described in verse 19.

This is an important concept for us to grasp. Think about the peril that a person places themselves in when they wander from the truth. Consider with me:

A. The Indication of the Text

James says that if a person is able to turn around the person who has erred from the truth, he will "save a soul from death".

James indicates that those who err from the truth, and never return are in danger of death. It is perilous, dangerous thing to wander from the truth!

With that being said, in order for us to fully grasp the peril of straying, we need to consider not only the indication of this text, but also further:

B. The Interpretation of the Text

To understand the correct interpretation of this text, we need to consider the larger teaching of the Bible.

Illustration:

Consider the parable the Lord gave in Luke 8, as well as Matthew 13. He told about a man who sowed some seed, and the different types of soil upon which the seeds fell.

The Lord taught that there are times when people seem to embrace the truth, and believe the gospel. They may even show signs of spiritual life. But eventually something turns them away from that truth, and chokes out the gospel in their lives.

Comparing what Jesus taught with what James says in this text, we then understand why the soul of the person who permanently errs from the truth will die.

The fact that they never return to the truth indicates they have never really believed with genuine, saving faith.

John gives the clearest statement about this principle. He says in 1 John 2:19:

1 John 2:19

¹⁹ They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would *no doubt* have continued with us: but *they went out*, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.

We must be careful assuming that everyone who claims to have been saved has actually been saved. If they stray from the truth, never to return, they reveal that they didn't fully believe the truth in the first place.

Illustration:

Now, if you and I were to visit the art museum and spend all of our time examining and studying the frames around the art, we will have missed the point of the art museum.

Likewise, if we read the last two verses of James, and think only about the death of the soul, and what happens to those who err, we will have missed the real point of this passage.

Therefore, as we look at this text, we learn not only that we should be conscious of the potential to stray, and that we should be clear about the peril of straying, but we see also thirdly that:

3. WE SHOULD BE COMMITTED TO THE PEOPLE THAT STRAYED

We have now reached the real destination of meaning in this text.

Let's look at it again as a whole. James says,

James 5:19-20

¹⁹Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; ²⁰Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.

The primary principle James is trying to convey with these closing verses is that those of us who see someone err from the truth have the opportunity and the obligation to search for them and rescue them from the danger they are in.

Think with me about this commitment we should have to those who have strayed from among us. First of all, notice:

A. The Mission We Have

Notice again that phrase at the close of verse 19, “and one convert him.” The word “convert” simply means to turn around, or to turn about.

It is the same word used in Revelation 1:12:

Revelation 1:12

¹² And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks;

Our mission then, according to James is to go to those who have strayed from the truth, and we are to turn them around, back toward the truth.

We are called to restore those wanderers back to the place from which they have wandered. Paul says in Galatians 6:1:

Galatians 6:1

¹ Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

If our mission is accomplished, James says we will have rescued them from death, and brought them to forgiveness so that we “hide a multitude of sins.”

Think of what a noble ministry this is! Preaching from this text over a century ago, the Prince of Preachers, Charles Spurgeon painted this word picture.

He said:

“A house is in flames, and in it is a woman with her children, who cannot by any means escape...She has lost all presence of mind and knows not how to act. The strong man comes, and says, "Make way! make way! I must save that woman!" ...he marches through the fire. Though scorched, and almost stifled, he gropes his way. He ascends one staircase, then another, and though the stairs totter, he places the woman beneath his arm, takes a child on his shoulder, and down he comes...He has jeopardized his life, and perhaps an arm may be disabled, or a limb taken away, or a sense lost, or an injury irretrievably done to his body, yet he claps his hands, and says, "I have saved lives from death!"

Spurgeon goes on to say, “But ah! brethren, the body which was saved from death to-day may die tomorrow. Not so the soul that is saved from death: it is saved everlastingly.”

With that being said, consider not only the mission we have, but also further:

B. The Means We Have

How are we to carry out these “search and rescue” missions after those who have strayed from the truth?

James does not specifically say in this text. However, the Word of God offers us some instruction on what we are to do to restore those who have erred.

- First of all, we are called to pray for those who have strayed.

1 John 5:16

¹⁶ If any man see his brother sin a sin *which is* not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.

Not only can we speak to God for them, but we should speak to them about God.

2 Thessalonians 3:15

¹⁵ Yet count *him* not as an enemy, but admonish *him* as a brother.

Matthew 18:15-16

¹⁵ Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not hear *thee*, *then* take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

One thing is clear; it is not an option for us to simply sit by and let people wander off without using some means to try to save them.

Close:

Far too many churches have membership rolls filled with the names of people who long ago wandered away without anybody so much as asking them where they were going.

We can't lock the doors and keep people from leaving, but we can make sure nobody leaves without knowing that their church family is absolutely committed to doing whatever we can to turn them around, and save their lives.

It sounds incredible, but almost a full month after the devastating earthquake in Haiti, a 28 year-old man named Evan Muncie was found alive inside the rubble of a market where he sold rice.

Muncie was emaciated and badly injured, but with some kind of limited water source, he had managed to stay alive for four weeks until someone trying to dig out the marketplace discovered him.

It is interesting that the Haitian government had declared search and rescue operations to be over almost two weeks before Muncie was discovered.

There are countless people who have strayed from the truth out wandering who knows where in this world.

James reminds us at the close of his book that the church has no right to call off the search and rescue until the Lord returns.

May we be reminded of the potential to stray, the peril of straying, and most of all, the people who've strayed that need someone to turn them around.