

## **A Final Invitation**

### **James 5:19-20**

#### **Introduction**

What is wrong when Johnny runs to mom to tell that Timmy hit him? Of course, the details matter greatly, but often Johnny's primary motivation is to make sure that Timmy gets what he thinks he deserves. He has spotted a sin and wants it to be dealt with, but most of the time not because his concern is first and foremost for the sinner. This is a temptation for all of us at different times, but it does not deny the fact that sinners do need to be called back. While the end of James' letter here seems to be a bit abrupt, in some ways it is a final application of many of the themes that James has woven together throughout the letter. In short, Christians are invited to once again count it all joy in the face of a particularly difficult trial—that of turning back a brother who is wandering from the truth.

#### **Wandering from the Truth**

In the Scriptures, the way one lives is often described as a walk (e.g., Ps. 1:1, Eph. 4:1). The early Christians were known as followers of "The Way" (Acts 9:2). James thus describes a brother who is living in sin as one who wanders from the truth. Wandering in the way one lives is the result of wandering from what is true. *"There is no one habitually bad, but upon some bad principle"* (Henry). And, at the same time, one is not really turned by simply being convinced of the truth. He must also do the word that he has heard (cf. 1:22). James makes this clear throughout his letter: faith and works (i.e., the way you live) are to be united in the life of a follower of Christ. Repeatedly, James rebukes the "double-minded" members of the community (e.g., 1:8, 4:8), those who may profess faith but doubt God and turn to worldly wisdom instead of the wisdom from above. Whenever we substitute God's wisdom for worldly wisdom, we wander from the truth.

How is it that one "among you" could be on his way to death? James speaks here of the ultimate spiritual death. But if someone is a part of the church, can they also be headed to death? Does this disrupt our understanding of "once saved, always saved" or of God's preservation of the saints? Not at all. We know that Jesus will never lose those that the Father has given to Him (John 6:39, 10:28), and we are to trust God's promise (Heb. 6:17-18). Our trust and hope is in Christ to hold us and not in our ability to hold to Him. At the same time, it is true that a Christian may walk in unrepentant sin for some time. And it may be the case that in the end, they never were actually trusting in God, never were His. These are the secret things of God (Deut. 28:28). Our duty is to operate based upon God's promises applied to what we see. When someone is wandering, we must recognize that they are flirting with death. God sometimes uses His people as the means for calling the wanderers back. James does not challenge Jesus' claim to never lose a Christian. He does invite us to operate faithfully within our limited view of God's designs.

#### **Turning a Sinner Back**

How do you turn someone from wandering without being a busybody (1 Peter 4:15), or without being like the tattler? Note that James does not give a specific plan for how to turn a sinner back. There are principles that remain constant (e.g., Gal. 6:1), but the specific methods or mechanics will often look different. Sometimes it may look like speaking

directly into a situation, while other times it may mean a joyful refusal to be moved from the truth yourself. Each situation certainly requires wisdom (cf. 1:5). We cannot confront a brother in the manner described in 4:11-12, by slandering or speaking evil of him. It must be done by first taking the log out of one's own eye, being spiritual, and considering ourselves lest we be tempted (Matt 7:1-5, Gal. 6:1). What is the purpose or intent in identifying and calling out sin in another? Or contrasting their wandering with steadfast living? Is it truly their good, or is it out of envy and self-seeking or vengeance? The problem with the wanderer is that he is being doubleminded, which you cannot combat by being doubleminded yourself. You need godly wisdom, so ask for it in faith (again, 1:5).

### **Covering a Multitude of Sins**

James' last words are a little bit shocking. On the one hand, it makes sense that we can "save a soul from death." Ultimately, of course, it is God who does this, but we recognize that God often uses one person as the means of bringing another to repentance. More difficult to see is how one's words or actions may be used to cover someone's sins. Like the Pharisees once said, "Only God can forgive sins." Again, consider the wandering in the context of the letter. The one who is wandering is double-minded, unstable in all his ways (1:8). This sort of wandering is not just a little sin off to the side, but a double mind that starts to infect every area of life (this is the effect of all sin when it is kept hidden and unconfessed). So, by turning him, the brother is the vehicle for covering, not just a singular sin of doctrinal error or in a single area of life. He is part of the covering of grace that God is spreading over the whole of this man's life as God brings it all back into His way. And James here reminds us too of the nature of God's grace. He is not interested in getting some sort of "payment" for each of your sins. He desires to cover your multitude of sins.

### **Conclusion**

James here invites Christians to be bold in confronting sin within their community. This is often very hard and uncomfortable because we fear the consequences and fallout. This is a fitting culmination to James' letter, since it is another testing of our faith (1:2-3). Do we trust the One who has called us to that situation? Do we need wisdom for this trial, this test, and are we asking for it in faith (1:5)? Are we ourselves doing the word we have heard and want to apply to the brother (1:21-22)? Have we submitted ourselves to the law of love that is full of mercy (2:8-13)? Are we taming our tongue, speaking grace and truth instead of cursing the wanderer (3:8-12)? Are we avoiding earthly wisdom and self-seeking envy and instead sowing peace as we seek to turn the brother back (3:13-18)? Are we keeping from envious fights and wielding worldly wisdom and instead humbling ourselves before the Lord, cleansing our own hands, and purifying our hearts from our own double-minded doubt (4:1-10)? If so, then James invites us to confidently seek to turn back the wanderer. Ultimately, this comes from understanding the grace that has been given to us. You do not follow Christ and remain in the truth because you have made the right decisions. You follow Christ because of His unrelenting love and pursuit of you. Standing in that grace, the Christian's task is to imitate Him in the pursuit of purity and peace with those among us. And this testing of our faith is part of what God uses to grow, not just Christians individually, but a body of believers together, into maturity.