

## Talking to Another About Sins • James 5:19-20

You and Pat have known each other for years. You've taken family vacations together. You often sat together in church and belonged to the same Bible study group. You prayed for each other as you had hard decisions to make. You were friends. But recently Pat has stopped coming to church. Your relationship has drifted apart. Pat's family business has done very well and it's almost as if money has become their God. The last time you were together Pat changed the subject every time you brought up Christian faith, the Bible, prayer or church. It seems like Pat is abandoning the Christian faith. So what should you do?

In the last lines of his New Testament booklet James gives a practical answer:

My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins.

There are many reasons why most of us would rather just ignore the problem and not do what the Bible says. Most of us don't like confronting anyone about anything. We would rather just ignore the problem and forget about Pat. We respect the privacy of other people and think it is none of our business what they believe or do. Who are we to judge others? It's not as if we are perfect Christians. Until we fix every problem and sin in our own lives we have no right to tell anyone else that he or she is wrong. Besides, isn't this the job of the church? If somebody wanders from the Christian faith, let the church confront it, not me.

Most of us think it unimaginable to go to a friend or family member and say, "You are not living the way you should and I would like to help you straighten out." It is so unimaginable that many of us find it hard to take these lines from the Bible seriously. It's almost like sky-diving or full-body tattooing—we know these

things exist but that doesn't mean they're for us.

But look again at what God and the Bible have to say here and do it with an open mind and heart that maybe this is something you should do:

My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

The first step is to watch out for the wanderer. When the Bible says in James 5:19 that someone may wander from the truth it assumes that the truth is absolute. This raises an issue in today's American society. Our nation has increasingly moved away from belief in absolute truth to relativism. Relativism is the belief that truth is always determined by its relationship to something or someone else. In other words, "What is true for you may not be true for me." So, we have people saying, "Abortion may be wrong for you but it's right for me", or, "Truth for you may be that homosexual behavior is wrong but truth for me is that homosexual behavior is okay."

The change is significant. Most earlier generations in America believed in absolute truth but disagreed on what it was. That is part of the normal

and appropriate debate in a free society. For example, the old way was for Christians, Jews, Muslims, Democrats and Republicans to all agree that there is absolute truth and absolute morality. However, they debated about what that absolute truth and absolute morality was. Our constitution provides for that open debate. As Christians we welcome the discussion, believing that the Christian message and morality will prove correct. However, when a society moves to believe there are no absolutes and that "what is true for you is different than what is true for me" we have taken a step toward anarchy. It is

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a sad and significant shift.

In James 5:19 the Bible is teaching that there is a right way to believe and a right way to live. There is absolute truth and there is absolute morality. There is truth and there is error; there is morality and there is immorality. But some people wander away from God's absolute truth.

There are two ways to wander from God's truth. It is possible to wander away to wrong belief or wrong behavior. Wrong belief is that which is contrary to the teaching of the Bible. It is denying that God exists, that Jesus is God's Son or that salvation from sin is possible only through Jesus Christ. Wrong behavior is doing what is contrary to the Bible and God's will. This may be anything from lying, stealing, committing adultery and dishonoring parents to no longer worshipping God and fellowshiping with the church.

Often we know exactly what wandering from the truth means without any lists or definitions. It is the Christian who believes or behaves in a changed and un-Christian manner. Such wandering is dangerous and may be disastrous. It is like three men who went for a walk in the woods of northern Minnesota. It was supposed to be a Sunday evening walk but the result was that two of the men nearly died and one did die—just two miles from where they started out. A person doesn't have to wander very far to get into deep trouble.

When someone wanders into sin, we as Christians are called by God to become rescuers. Like lifeguards on an ocean beach the first responsibility of a rescuer is to be on the lookout for anything that is wrong. In other words, we should keep our eyes and ears open for someone who is getting too far out. We should be ready to jump in and help the person who is in danger.

Who is someone you know who might fit the description of a wanderer? Who used to be close to God but is now drifting away? Who used to be faithful but now isn't? Who do you know who increasingly flirts with danger in relationships, beliefs and lifestyle? Who used to be at

church that you haven't seen there lately?

Changes in patterns of church attendance are usually a significant indication of changes in a person's spiritual life. It goes both ways—the person who rarely or never attended church and starts to come regularly or the person who used to be regular but now misses more and more. Almost always that is a sign of some significant change happening for good or bad in that person's relationship with God.

Once you have someone in mind, think and pray to determine what is going wrong in that person's life. Then care enough to pursue (“ . . . *someone should bring him back . . .*”). The approach will vary with each person and situation, but in almost every case this means going to that person and finding out what is going wrong and then doing whatever you need to do to bring that person back to right beliefs and right behavior. In other words, bring that person back to God. It may require teaching. Maybe you will need

to confront. You may need to comfort or provide encouragement.

Caring enough to pursue the wanderer is the Christian thing to do. It certainly isn't Christian to leave a lost person alone, to withhold warn-

ing or to refuse to rescue someone who needs help. Admittedly, there are times when this can be hard. The response is not guaranteed. But it is the loving and right thing to do.

But what if it works? What if you offer help to someone who has wandered away and you pull off the rescue? James 5:20 tells us, “*Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death . . .*” That's quite a benefit. It doesn't say whether this “death” refers to physical death or eternal spiritual death; it could be both. Either way, this is a big deal.

Have you ever saved someone else's life? Some of you are physicians, nurses or paramedics. Others have saved lives as police officers or lifeguards. Some have saved lives by being in the right place at the right time or acting with great courage.

The closest I ever came to saving a physical life was at the Royal Gorge in Colorado when a friend went too close to the edge of the canyon.

*A person doesn't have to wander very far to get into deep trouble.*

I yelled for him to stop. He stopped right at the brim with his hands flailing to stop him from going over.

It's a good feeling to save someone's life. But whether it feels good or not, it's a good thing to do. Every time any of us brings back a wanderer from truth and God, we save someone from death. "*Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*"

I'm not exactly sure what James meant by "*cover over a multitude of sins.*" I suppose he meant that God forgives those sins and forgets them. Then that person's relationship to God is as if those sins had never happened.

Think of a child who steals family money, runs away from home and gets into trouble with the law. Then somewhere out there that prodigal meets up with a Christian who cares enough to become a rescuer. The life of that prodigal child is turned around. There is a change, repentance, a reconnection with God and a reunion with family.

What does a parent do upon being reunited with that prodigal? Do those parents rehearse every instance of sin? Of course not! They throw their arms around that beloved child and are delighted and thrilled to have the child back. Their forgiveness covers a multitude of sins as if they had never happened. And the Christian who was God's agent in that child's life watches from the perimeter and takes delight as the one

who turned a sinner from the error of his way, saved that child from death and saw a multitude of sins covered up.

Earlier I asked whom you know who fits the description of a "wanderer from the truth." Will you be God's representative for great good in that person's life? Will you pray for her? Will you talk to him? Will you do whatever God calls you to do to bring the wanderer back to God?

Do it! Do it for that person's sake. Do it for Jesus' sake. Do it for the delight and thrill of being the agent of Jesus Christ to rescue someone from death and disaster and sin. Do it to be the instrument of God to bring a wanderer back home again.

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