

James 5:19-20 – Search for the Strays

Vincent, Calvin, TSK, GreekLexicon, Henry, PNT, Poole, Robertson, JFB, Geneva, Family, Clarke, Rienecker, Trapp, Gaebelein, Adamson, Doriani, Brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus: This is a tough sermon to preach in our modern times. Why? **We are being taught from youth we own ourselves and it is none of other people's business what we believe and what we do with our lives.** As a result, many youths are walking away from what they have been taught in churches and treat it with contempt. **They walk away in spirit**...remaining in the church but resisting those trying to correct them. They **walk away literally** by going to other churches where faithful doctrines are substituted with emotions, and where discipline is non-existent.

But that is not how God intends for us to live. Christians need each other. No one is to ever say, "It's my life. I will do whatever I want." The Bible reminds us that we are our brother's keeper! Most Reformed church members take vows when a child is baptized, promising to watch over him. **This responsibility to watch over strays is what you will hear about today.**

Our headings are:

Believers stray from the faith
Believers must turn him back

Our goals are: **You will see the importance of finding straying brothers, gifting him God's Word, and bringing them back to Jesus.**

Believers stray from the faith

19 Brethren, ***if*** anyone among you **wanders from the truth,**

1. There are different use (or conditions) for the word "if." Consider 5 of them.

- "If" could mean **something is possible.** (If I said how old I am, you wouldn't believe.)
 - "If" could mean **something is contrary to fact – not possible.** (If he were a prophet, he would know who I am.)
 - "If" could mean a **future condition that is more probable or likely.** (If he doesn't show up, I'll have to take an Uber)
 - "If" could mean a **future condition that is less probable.** (Even if you suffer because of righteousness, you are happy.)
 - "If" could mean a **general condition.** (If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom is not able to stand.)
- In this case, it is a 3rd class condition...as it is likely that brothers would stray.** That was a normal thing!

2. In our context, brethren may stray - visibly divert from the path of truth – in 2 ways.

- They can stray in doctrine.** Maybe they read something that seems attractive but is not based on God's Word. **Galatians 3:1** O foolish Galatians! **Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth,** before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?
- They can stray in life.** They know what is right, they know good doctrines, but they ignore it. Sometimes, men can stray in **both doctrine and life.**

3. All Christians are likely to stray!

Brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, children, friends, neighbors, young and old, and male or female wander from the truth. But even elders and pastors wander from the truth – everyone...then as now!

Hebrews 5:2 He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, **since he himself is also subject to weakness.**

(One URC minister was deposed from office recently because he embraced Eastern Orthodox doctrines.)

4. What made these Christians to whom Apostle James was writing stray in doctrine and life?

Some were side-tracked on their Christian journey by envy. As a result, they wandered from God on to dangerous roads and abused the poor. The plight of widows, orphans, and foreigners were ignored. Yes, they **heard good doctrines and said they believed those good doctrines, but their manner of life did not match their mouths.**

5. Lessons:

a. No man is free from error. All have a propensity to stray. To deny this is to deny the obvious. Don't assume your loved ones, including your children, or your spouse, or your father, will not stray from the truth. If you do, you will become careless.

b. Pray for those who have strayed. Call them to return to truth. Use your mouth for the good of the straying brother.

c. There can be no change to God's truth. Those who think they can have their version of the truth are fooling themselves, but they can't fool God. Truth is objective. There is one truth. So identify those who have left the path of truth. Don't think it is only the pastor's job! The job starts with you as parents. Ask: Has money taken over their lives? Has man-centered worship their new love? Has education become their god? Has pride destroyed their humility?

Believers must turn him back

...and someone **turns him back,** 20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will

save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

1. Christians were to turn back the one who has strayed.

The expression “turn back” is the same word that means to convert, but it is not referring to initial conversion but of backsliding into sin for a time, as all Christians do.

2. More specifically, it was the duty of stronger brothers to restore weaker brothers who have strayed.

Galatians 6:1 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a **spirit of gentleness, considering yourself** lest you also be tempted. **2** Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Remember how Nathan went to David? David fell into sin and the stronger brother had work to do. It was risky business to tell King David he was a murderer, but Nathan had to do it. **Similarly, those who were mature were to restore the straying.** This was a spiritual work and required a spiritual man. So all who were mature were able to help correct the weak.

3. To encourage stronger brothers to restore the straying, Apostle James wanted them to know the fruit (reward) of their labor:

They would save a soul from death!

What a high honor this was!

Apostle James used this language, not to suggest that a man could lose his salvation, but to emphasize the importance of rescuing the one who was straying. He knew none of God's elect could be lost.

If the straying one didn't turn back after being counseled to do so, **it showed he was not a believer in the first place.**

God not only encouraged but warned the mature to warn the weak when they stray!

Ezekiel 3: 18 "When I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' **and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity;** but his blood I will require at your hand.

4. What guides how the strong believers were to restore the one who strayed (from Galatians 6:1)?

a. Gentleness! This means strong believers had to have the right attitude in their heart, keeping in mind that gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit. God did not want mature believers to overwhelm the weak with persistent and pressing harshness and nagging. Apostle Matthew gives details in 18:15-17 of humility...going first...taking others after...before going to the whole church.

2 Timothy 2:25 in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth,

Galatians 5:22 But the fruit of the **Spirit** is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

The mature were to be gentle because they were not doing this to prove they were right. They didn't need just vinegar for healing, but oil as well.

b. Consider their own weakness. They had a body of sin, a corrupt and treacherous heart, that was full of deceitful lusts, by which they were also tempted to stray. Isn't it true that **“they are commonly the most severe judges who forget their own weaknesses?”** Yet they had to have the goal of restoring. And they had to always remember they themselves daily needed help from God.

Matthew 7:5 "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?"

5. When the straying one returned, the one who helped him to return would have covered the straying one's sins with love!

This is an often-repeated passage in the Bible.

Proverbs 10:12 Hatred stirs up strife, **but love covers all sins.**

1Peter 4:8 And above all things have fervent love for one another, for **"love will cover a multitude of sins."**

It simply meant that love "covered" the sins of others before men, not exposing the guilty part to shame! Obviously, this required work! **Love is work!** No one was allowed to ignore the sins of the straying.

6. Lessons:

a. You are not allowed to ignore anyone who is weak and struggling. Thinking something is not your business doesn't excuse you from that business.

But if you do speak up and the erring one rejects you, his blood will be on his own head.

Ezekiel 3:19 "Yet, **if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn** from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, **he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul.**

20 "Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and I lay a stumbling block before him, **he shall die; because you did not give him warning**, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; **but his blood I will require at your hand.**

b. Imagine the good that comes to man who is straying who returns. Imagine how good this is for his spouse and his children! Imagine the joy that comes to the church! Can you imagine doing anything better?

c. Imagine the glory that comes to Christ when you help one of his straying children to return home! Remember the joy of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son? That was heavenly joy!

Psalms 32:1 Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered.

Can you imagine doing anything better than to rescue the King's child? It is great to be able to give food or winter jackets to one of God's children, but imagine finding the King's child who was lost! The King really, really loves his children – everyone one of them and he paid a great price for each one.

d. Imagine the reward you would get for doing this? That is a reward you can count on in heaven and maybe even in this life.

e. Let love guide your restoring actions. When you do, you will bury the sins of the straying and not broadcast them on the streets, as Ham did to his father Noah.

f. Start restoring the straying ones in your home where fathers are the spiritual leaders. This means fathers are to become knowledgeable about how to attack the arguments that young people face. Fathers must not be missing in action, becoming too busy with work or play and leave a child in error. Can you answer your child who says our worship is dead, but the Harvest's is lively? Can you explain why being rebaptized as an adult and rejecting your covenant baptism is a serious sin? Can you show your children how to lead balanced lives? **This continues in the church where elders are spiritual leaders.** Elders have to become aware of the false teachings arising and know new trends in society and have arguments against the lies from the civil government. Can you explain why the Sabbath is still in force? Can you show the dangers of lusting for money? Can you say why believing in creation as the Bible teaches is so important? Do you have the resources to help someone who is hooked on drugs or pornography? **In fact, all mature Christians should be ready to find and return the strays!** You may not abandon the or ignore the weaker brother, as is your natural tendency.

g. Of course you are not to cover the sin of a man who refuses to repent.

Conclusion:

When faith is not seen and people stray from the following Jesus, you who are spiritual need to find and restore the ones who are straying. They must answer the questions of the straying ones...pray for them...and point them back to Jesus.

Brothers and sisters in Jesus:

1. Identify and call the straying ones to return to God's favor! Address their concerns! Get help if you don't have the answers! You who are now mature must take on that task! What a Christmas gift this could be!

2. Look for real repentance. Don't be fooled by only emotional repentance. Repentance must be heartfelt. Tears, like Esau, were fake. (Hebrews 12) Actions, like Zacchaeus, show true repentance.

3. If you are straying, accept the help from your family, your friends, your elders, and your pastors. Don't stay in the pig pen when your father has a big beautiful house with an abundance of blessings.

Finally: Your life apart from Jesus is hopeless. If you desire to be joined to his family, he welcomes you. He does so because Jesus appeased his Father for sinners. Come home today.