



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Keeping the Saved Saved

James 5:19-20

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Introduction

1. For a few years in the late 1990s, an elder in the congregation with whom I worked repeated several times every year that we needed to devote more effort to “keeping the saved saved.” Usually, he would say it in a meeting when we were especially concerned with matters relating to our growth. His observation is not unique, as the following shows:

Helping bring back wayward Christians securely into the “fold” may constitute one of the most neglected responsibilities of the church today. One thinks of God’s heart for such “little ones,” as disclosed in Matthew’s account of the parable of the lost sheep (Mt 18:10-14). Many churches, particularly growing ones, count only the number of visitors, new members, converts, those baptized, and so on, but never notice how many disappear out “the back door.”¹

2. Notice that the setting and point in Matthew 18 are different from Luke 15:3-7.
 - a. In Luke, Jesus defends outreach to outsiders to critical scribes and Pharisees.
 - b. In Matthew, the story follows warnings about causing others to stumble and fall away.
 - c. The alternative is not just to not cause stumbling, but to actually seek the fallen.
3. That is James’s point, especially forceful since it is the last thing his letter says.

Body

- I. An Appeal that Fits James’s Theme.
 - A. Keep in mind some things we have seen as we have moved through James.
 1. From the start, he is concerned about trials and temptations, not so much because of the trials, but because of their connection with maturity and growth (1:2-4).
 2. He calls for unwavering faith (1:5-7) that resists the allure of temptation (1:12-15) whether from immorality, favoritism, profession without practice, misuse of the tongue, quarreling over selfish desires, too much trust in this world’s things, pressure from oppressors, or illness or spiritual weakness.
 3. He is urgent, using “more imperative verbs per word . . . than in any other NT book.”²
 4. He sees true faith as a community issue, especially in 5:16.

¹ Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 252.

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 249.

- B. It is therefore fitting that he closes with a call to the community (“brothers”) to work together and intervene when necessary to help everyone be unwavering in faith.

II. An Analysis of James’s Appeal.

A. Verse 19 presents the situation.

1. The verse presents a conditional circumstance (ἐάν, *ean*, “if,” with the subjunctive verbs πλανηθῇ, *planēthē*, “wanders,” and ἐπιστρέψῃ, *epistrepsē*, “brings him back”); this points to instruction for a problem that could develop, not necessarily one that had.
2. “Wanders” (πλανηθῇ, *planēthē*) is the word that gives us “planet” “because a planet does not appear fixed in the sky as a star, but ‘wanders’ (or ‘strays’) through the night sky” (Blomberg & Kamell, 248).
 - a) It may be passive, of one being led astray or deceived (see its other use in 1:16), or imply a middle voice where one wanders of his own accord.
 - b) Certainly, both are possible and perhaps James intended some ambiguity.³
3. The wandering is from “the truth,” a word that in biblical thought includes propositional ideas, i.e., knowing, but also obeying and doing (e.g., Gal. 5:7; 1 John 1:6; cf. Ps. 51:6).⁴
4. The appropriate response to one who is wandering is for “someone” (indefinite) to “bring him back” (ἐπιστρέφω, *epistrephō*).
 - a) “Turn back” (ἐπιστρέφω) is an important word in Christian preaching, used often for the initial turn from sin to God, the completion of the process begun with a changed mind (Acts 3:19; also 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 26:18, 20; 28:27; 1 Thess. 1:9).
 - b) Here, it refers to a Christian turning back (note the plural “among you” ἐν ὑμῖν, *en humin*) to the way of truth from which he or she has wandered.

B. Verse 20 tells what to do when the condition presents itself.

1. The subject is again indefinite: “whoever brings back” (literally, “the one who turns back” [ὁ ἐπιστρέψας, *ho epistrepsas*, an aorist active participle]).
2. The concern is for a “sinner” (ἁμαρτωλὸν, *hamartōlon*) who is in a “wandering way.”⁵
3. The result is being “saved . . . from death” and “covering a multitude of sins.”⁶
4. But, there is ambiguity: whose soul is saved and whose sins are covered?
 - a) There are three options.
 - (1) Both phrases could refer to the one who does the rescuing.
 - (2) Both could refer to the one being rescued.
 - (3) One could refer to the one who does the rescuing and the other to the one being rescued.

³ Blomberg and Kamell, 248, cite Kistemaker (*James and the Epistles of John*, 185) who observes that “both explanations are possible and acceptable at the same time.” They are right to reply “that both are possible and acceptable, but probably not at the same time, since they require quite different categorizations of the verb.”

⁴ See Moo, 249; also Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 263; and William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, The New Daily Study Bible, 154-155.

⁵ A literal rendering. The translation “error of his way” (KJV, ASV, NASB), though not wrong, uses phrasing that obscures the use of πλάνης (*planēs*), cognate to πλανᾶω (*planāō*) in v. 19. Cf. Rom. 1:27; Eph. 4:14; 1 Thess. 2:3; 1 John 4:6.

⁶ The latter phrase is rooted in Prov. 10:12, found in 1 Peter 4:8, and reflects a traditional way to refer to forgiveness (Psa. 32:1; 85:2). It is the covering of sin by forgiveness, not a *cover up* of sin.

- b) There are examples of God's servants being blessed for bringing sinners to God (e.g., Jer. 15:19; Dan. 12:3; 1 Tim 4:16),⁷ with Ezekiel 3:18-21 offered by some as most significant since it connects the salvation of the prophet with the task of warning righteous people not to sin.
- c) But, Ezekiel's "saving of his own soul is predicated on his obedience in giving the warning, not on the repentance of the persons warned, whereas James is linking the saving or covering to the actual return of the erring believer" (McCartney, 264).
- 5. The context and obvious intent make option 2 the best choice.
 - a) James has been talking about confession and forgiveness (5:13-16).
 - b) The wandering one no longer walks in faith; that's why he needs rescued.
 - c) The goal is for him to return to the right track, living in unwavering faith.
 - d) At the same time, there is clearly a benefit in being a rescuer of those who wander, if nothing more than "find[ing] ourselves drawn back closer to God's grace and righteousness" (Blomberg & Kamell, 249); such reaffirms our own priority and unwavering commitment.

III. An Application of James's Appeal.

- A. We should first ask why this focus on restoring an erring brother has not been emphasized more.
 - 1. Perhaps because so few texts explicitly mention it; this is the first time in James.
 - 2. Closely aligned with that, there are so many subjects needing attention.
 - 3. Or, does the neglect reflect something about our times and priorities?
 - a) Have we absorbed our time's "live and let live" views?
 - b) Are we more focused on the individual instead of being community oriented?
 - c) Are we afraid of going where we are not wanted? Or too quick to leave people to their own choices (without any effort otherwise)?
- B. Maybe the problem is one of priority: are we really "seeking first the [reign] of God" (Matt. 6:33), or just letting church be one of the important things we do?
- C. Then, again, maybe the problem is that we're waiting for someone else to do it.
 - 1. Earlier, James specified intercession the elders were to do (5:13-14).
 - 2. But, here, the whole body is responsible; anyone can/should do it.

Conclusion

1. Concluding his analysis of our text, Douglas Moo observes:

If James is indeed something of a sermon in epistolary form, these last two verses are an appropriate conclusion. Not only should the readers of James "do" the words he has written; they should be deeply concerned to see that others "do" them also. It is by sharing with James the conviction that there is indeed an eternal death, to which the way of sin leads, that we shall be motivated to deal with sin in our lives and in the lives of others (Moo, 251).

2. What is your conviction about God and way of faith? What are you "doing" about it?

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⁷ See Barclay, 156, and how he favors the third option with his translation: "... he who has turned a sinner from his wandering way will save his brother's soul from death and will hide a multitude of his own sins" (154).