

Drifting

Endurance-Part VI

James 5:19-20

You may have heard about the visit we had this past week . . . two young doe broke a window in broad daylight and wandered into our church.

I asked our Ed, our Director of Safety and Security to have the surveillance video put together so I could see it . . . Katie our videographer had a little fun with the footage and produced this little vignette—I thought you'd enjoy it.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnh0xHgimbY>

This explains why our Colonial Outdoorsmen are putting up a deer stand in the lobby.

I couldn't help but think though that the greater problem we have in the church—the church at large—the church of the 21st century is not deer wandering in, but sheep wandering away.

Spiritually wandering . . . spiritually drifting sheep.

And James will end his letter with that warning, with honest, down to earth, once again, in-your-face language.

He writes in the closing verses of his letter to scattered believers throughout the Roman empire—chapter *five and in verse 19, My brethren, if any among you wander- stray-from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*

Now I've read several commentaries and I've heard several sermons over the years using this text as a soul-winning text for evangelism.

There's certainly some truth to that application but the fact that you read the words sinner and save and death immediately leads some to assume that James cannot be talking about a believer, but that's exactly who James is talking about.

This text is not about evangelism. It is about reconciliation—it's about spiritual restoration. It's about the prodigal turning back toward home.

James gets to the end of his letter and realistically and correctly assumes that there will be some among them who will wander away from the truth he's just delivered in this letter.

There will be times and maybe even seasons when someone among them is not going to resist the devil or submit to God or cleanse their hands or purify their hearts or surrender to the Lord as they map out their lives and their plans for themselves.

Now James ends the letter by giving us warning and a solution. He'll describe the runaway and then describe the rescue operation.

There are two primary characters in this scene the prodigal and the pursuer . . . and then there's the prize.

1. The Prodigal

Let's take a closer look at the prodigal. *Verse 19* again, a little slower, *My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth...*

Literally, "*my brethren, if anyone among you strays from the truth.*"

He's talking about a believer from among the brethren straying from the truth.

Listen, an unbeliever doesn't stray from the truth. He can't because he's never come to the truth; he's never centered his life upon it;

- he's blinded by unbelief to the truth (2 Corinthians 4:4);
- he's offended by the truth (1 Peter 2:8);
- he suppresses the truth (Romans 1:18);

- he's never come to the truth because he would rather believe a lie about God than believe the truth about God (Romans 1:25);
- and so he refuses to receive the truth and make it his own (2 Thess. 2:10).

It may sound odd to hear it this way, but a believer is the only person who can actually wander away from the truth. A prodigal is someone who belongs to the family from which he's wandered.

In fact, James uses the aorist tense for this verb "to wander/to stray" to clearly reveal that this is not someone who habitually lives a life away from the truth. James is referring to an occasional drifting away.ⁱ

This is a reference to a believer backsliding, the believer in *Galatians 6* who has become entangled in sin and in spiritual danger and decline.

To add to this idea, James uses the word translated *wander* or *stray* from the Greek verb *planao* (πλαναω) which gives us our English word for planet.

These bodies around sun were called planets because they seemed to wander in the sky.ⁱⁱ

The truth is, you've probably learned as a Christian by now that wandering from the path is easy. You don't have to do something terrible to find your spiritual house is not in order.

Just stop cutting the grass . . . don't paint anything . . . don't repair anything . . . stop vacuuming the carpet . . . don't do the dishes . . . don't sweep the driveway . . . don't replace any light bulbs. And before you know it, you're in a mess. It was just little things.

James is warning us all in his usually soft and kind and compassionate way. Don't mess around with the truth; don't barter with the truth; don't negotiate or compromise with the truth. It's to be obeyed and lived.

This is the meaning of *Hebrews 2 and verse 1 where the believer is challenged to pay close attention to what he's heard, so that he doesn't drift away from it.*

Drifting from the truth is always connected at some point to a decision or two or three where you thought you'd just sort of coast along . . . and you discovered that you never drift forward.

And if you are not moving forward, you are automatically drifting backward. It is either regression or progression.ⁱⁱⁱ

D. A. Carson, one of our coming summer series speakers, put it this way when he wrote, We do not drift toward holiness. We do not drift toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and

delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith; we drift toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we drift toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.^{iv}

Robert Robinson, admitted the reality of this warning against wandering in his classic hymn he wrote in the late 1700's;

O to grace how great a debtor,
Daily I'm constrained to be;
Let Thy grace, Lord, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee;
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love,
Here's my heart, oh take and seal it,
Seal it for thy courts above.

Prone to wander . . . that's the reality of James' final appeal. Drifting is an ever present danger in the life of the disciple.

So James comes to the close of his letter and he sounds the warning with frank reality. He isn't the kind of writer who says, "Now now . . . I know you'll do everything we've just discussed in my letter . . . I know, it took your pastor 30 sermons to get through it, but you got the picture . . . and I know you won't have any problems obeying it all."

No, he effectively says, "**If** meaning, this is the probability of your Christian experience, *there will be some among you who drift away from something of this truth and so here's what I want you to do for each other.*"

And now James turns our attention from the prodigal to the pursuer.

2. The Pursuer

Notice next in *verse 19* the appearance of someone who *turns him back* . . . notice *verse 20* . . . *he turns a sinner from the error of his way.*

The word for "turn" is a compound word which means to literally turn them around.^v

In other words, they're heading in the wrong direction and you turn them around.

The word for **turn** can refer to the conversion of an unbeliever who turns to God for salvation (*Acts 14:15 and 1 Thessalonians 1:9*).

But it can also be used of restoration and fellowship which fits the context here since James is clearly writing to believers about wayward believers from among them.

I found it interesting as I tracked this verb through the scriptures, that the verb "to turn" here was also

used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for God Himself turning again to His people (*Psalm 90:13*).^{vi}

The Lord Jesus used this word when He told Peter that after Peter denied Him and then repented he would be turned and used to strengthen the believers (*Luke 22:32*).

Jesus used the same word for Peter returning to his walk of obedience that James uses here for the prodigal who is turned back to the path.

The pursuer here in *James 5* comes along and intersects the wayward path of the believer and turns him around so that he is once again heading in the right direction.

Which is an amazing and wonderful perspective isn't it?

We know that God ultimately turns someone around. God ultimately leads us to repentance – God's Spirit ultimately and regularly convicts our hearts of sin.

But God uses other believers too and in the language and perspective of James, the believer is the agent of restoration.

Without any theological hesitation or explanation, James describes the pursuing believer as the one who turns the prodigal around.

This ought to make us alert to some common misconceptions of pursuing sinning believers. Let me give you a few of them.

1. Number one; some would say that it's wrong to intrude into a sinning believer's life uninvited

"You know . . . the prodigal didn't ask me to give him my opinion." How often will a backsliding Christian invite you over to inform them that they're heading in the opposite direction of the truth? No, the prodigal stops inviting you over.

Anyone who throws themselves in the way of the backsliding Christian will most often arrive uninvited.

In fact, part of the challenge is catching up with them as they slide off the path.

Another reason people hesitate to get involved is because they've bought into the misconception that:

2. It's not very loving to confront someone about sin

Bad news is not a very loving thing to deliver. And so the believer puts on his blinders and whenever he's around the sinning believer he

assumes that the best thing he can do is never bring it up.

Paul told the Thessalonian believers to *warn the disobedient Christian as a brother*. (*2 Thessalonians 3:15*)

A disobedient Christian—James is not referring to a Christian losing their salvation and needs to be saved all over again as if someone who is born again can become "unborn". No, James is talking about the very real possibility of a brother, a Christian brother, wandering away in disobedience that must be warned of wasting their lives. And that's the loving thing to do.

Frankly, it's actually *unloving* to allow your Christian friend to get off the track without a warning . . . without any concern . . . without you telling them you're praying for them to return.

Would a doctor be loving to discover cancer in your body but because that's gonna be bad news and it's gonna mess up your life and cause you to lose sleep then he is going to come into the examination room with the results and put on his blinders of love and tell you, "It's nothing . . . in fact, a couple weeks of vacation will take care of it." Hey, that's good news!

I like that Doctor. The last time I went to my doctor, my doctor told me I needed to lose weight. That was not nice, but in the end it was the truth, and I needed to hear it.

Not only is it misguided to think that it's wrong to intrude into the prodigal's life uninvited and it's unloving to confront their sin; a third misconception is that;

3. It's none of your business.

Hey, it isn't our business . . . I guess if it's *anybody's* business, it's you guys on the elder board.

Would you notice that James is saying the exact opposite thing.

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one among you turns him back

You see in the mind of the Spirit of God through James the writer, this *is* the business of the other believers.

This isn't just the job of the professionals; it's the job of the parishioners.

And the person who says, "Well, I've just never seen that done;" is not so much reflecting on the integrity of the biblical command here, he's reflecting on the integrity of the believing congregation.

Our problem is not just that we have delinquent prodigals. We have delinquent Christians.

What would you think if your house was on fire and the firefighters showed up in full gear, lights flashing, and they all got out and came over to where you were standing and said, “Is this your house?” Well, don’t worry about the blaze; it’ll burn out in a couple of hours.

You’d say, “Wait a second. Your job isn’t to watch fires; it’s to put them out . . . do your job.”

What would you think if you saw a policeman watching a bunch of guys beating up somebody downtown? You’d automatically wonder why he isn’t doing his job.

A Christian who sees his brother or sister drifting away from the truth and says, “It’s none of my business” doesn’t understand part of their assignment.^{vii}

It actually is our business, and you need to understand that the stakes are high.

Would you notice the prize involved as the pursuer chases down the prodigal.

3. The Prize

v. 20 Let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way, will accomplish two things:

a. First, he will save the prodigal’s soul from death

We’ll call this a rescue back from spiritual calamity

The pursuer will save the prodigal’s soul from death. James could mean exactly that—the sinning, unrepentant believer is brought to an early death.

- John describes this possibility in *1 John 5:16-17*;
- Paul described the church in Corinth as having had some among them die early as a result of unrepentant sin (*1 Corinthians 11:30*);
- Watch yourselves, John wrote, that you not lose your full reward (*2 John 1:8*).

John could also be using the word for death as a metaphor for a deathlike existence.^{viii}

In other words, even though the believer is saved, he languishes in guilt and futility and purposelessness and bitterness, why? Because of drifting away . . . but then a brother or sister comes along and confronts you and you recognize by God’s grace and their

counsel the obstacle to your spiritual vitality and the sin to confess and you are rescued from a wasted life.

Not only is there a rescue back from spiritual calamity, but secondly, **there is a reconciliation back to spiritual communion**

Notice again, *He who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*

Don’t get the idea that this means we sweep sins under the rug and act like nothing ever happened.^{ix}

The pursuer doesn’t help the prodigal work on a press release—something bland to say to the public.

There is a Greek word for hide, and that word is not used here. This isn’t hiding sin; this isn’t explaining away sin; this is exposing and confessing it.

The prodigal is coming clean.

This audience of Jews to whom James is writing would have immediately recognized the concept of covering sin. It was used throughout the Old Testament where to have sins covered was to have sins forgiven.^x

Here it has the added nuance of not being seen by anybody else anymore, not because they are concealed, but because they have been confessed.

One commentator said, the prodigal is not branded in the church as someone who once went astray, but is part of a company in which all are forgiven sinners.^{xi}

A multitude of sins is covered. What a prize for the pursuer to passionately run after an agent of reconciliation, he runs after the prodigal on a rescue mission . . . a believing brother or sister is drifting away from the truth . . . he hopes and prays to rescue them back from spiritual calamity. He hopes and prays to reconcile them to spiritual communion with Christ and His church.

Perhaps I’m speaking today to a prodigal on the run. You’ve drifted for days, weeks, months, maybe even years and maybe you’re wondering if it’s too late.

Maybe you think you’ve drifted too far away. The sins have now mounted up and the view back is no longer visible.

Follow the sound of my voice. God will cover a multitude of sins; which is another way of saying, every sin you’ve got He can handle. Every sin you confess He can wipe away. God will freely pardon you (Isaiah 55:7)

He is not too weary . . . His grace is not diminished . . . His patience is the patience of the prodigal father who waits . . . His forgiveness is not earned . . . it is available and free.

Turn around . . . turn around and come home.
Listen to this verse written to Christians not unbelievers, by the way, but to Christians. If you will confess your sins, He will be faithful and just to forgive your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

This is the practical terminology of a confessing Christian.

Confess your sins—plural. Specific sins that come to mind—confess the sins to your Savior that have blocked your communion and dissipated your joy and stifled your soul, and your sins will be covered in practical terms they will no longer be seen.

What a rescue. What reconciliation.

We, the believer, are challenged to join in on this search and rescue operation. It *is* our business.

One author wrote of that amazing event during World War II where in the spring of 1940, Hitler's armored tank division of panzers were overrunning France. The Dutch had already surrendered as had the Belgians. More than 250,000 British soldiers and 100,000 allied troops were stuck on the coast of France in the channel port of Dunkirk. They faced imminent capture or death.

Hitler's troops, only a few miles away in the hills of France, closed in on an easy kill. The Royal Navy

had enough ships to pick up only 17,000 men and send them to safety. Parliament was summoned and told to brace for hard and heavy tidings.

Then while the troops watched with fading hope, suddenly a bizarre fleet of ships and boats appeared on the horizon of the English Channel. Fishing boats, tug boats, lifeboats, sailboats, yachts, an island ferry named Gracie Fields and even the America's Cup challenger Endeavor, all manned by civilians, sped to the rescue. This ragtag armada rescued all the remaining troops over 300,000 of them and returned them to the shores of England. It remains one of the most remarkable spontaneous naval rescue operations in history.^{xii}

Why? Because there were fellow soldiers . . . who were trapped . . . who needed help.

We the church, are God's ragtag armada . . . boats of all kinds all sizes and shapes and personalities and backgrounds and races and histories.

All of us, flawed and bailing out water of our own sail to the rescue.

We are pursuers of prodigals . . . James knew that after writing a letter like this, we'd need those who would obey this final command to join in on this rescue operation commissioned by God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 06/19/2011 by Stephen Davey.

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i D. Edmond Hiebert, James (BMH Books, 1992), p. 307

ii Spiros Zodhiates, The Patience of Hope: An Exposition of James 4:13-5:20 (AMG Publishers, 1981), p. 216

iii Tony Evans, James: The Perfect Christian (Word Publishing, 1998), p. 246

iv D.A. Carson, quoted in "Reflections," Christianity Today (7-31-00)

v Hiebert, p. 308

vi Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Abridged Theological Dictionary of the New Testament; edited by Gerhard Kittel, 1992), p. 1095

vii Evans, p. 253

viii Charles R. Swindoll, James: Practical and Authentic Living (Insight for Living, 1991), p. 199

ix Warren W. Wiersbe, James: Be Mature (Victor Books, 1979), p. 174

x Hiebert, p. 310

^{xi} Peter Davids quoted by Hiebert, p. 310

^{xii} Doug Banister, The Word and Power Church (Zondervan, 1999), p. 33