

Rescue the Wanderer

Let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:20).

Devotional

When Jesus told us in Matthew 12:34 that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks,” He made it clear that our tongues can serve to reveal the state of our hearts. As we have seen in the book of James, if our works reveal whether or not we possess true faith (2:14–26), then certainly the works we perform with our tongues demonstrate the authenticity of our profession.

Having commanded his audience to submit their tongues to the wisdom of God (3:1–4:12), James describes a few practical ways to do this in the final verses of his epistle. When our speech is trustworthy and we use our tongues to pray for and to comfort others (5:12–18), we demonstrate that our profession of faith is genuine and live according to the “royal law” of Scripture (2:8).

In today’s passage, James concludes his epistle with a call for believers to use the tongue wisely in order to restore wandering believers to the truth (5:19–20). This work of true faith is very much in keeping with earlier exhortations to pray for one another (v. 16) and to use the tongue to bless and encourage others (3:9–10). After all, is it not our prayers and encouragements that God uses to help other believers maintain their faith in times of great difficulty?

In addition to prayer and encouragement, the proper and loving confrontation of others involved in sin can also restore wandering believers to the truth (Matthew 18:15). However it is accomplished, James makes it clear that bringing back a sinner from wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (5:20). It is the sinner’s soul that is saved from death since only a “righteous” person will be able to restore a wandering brother or sister. The sins that are covered probably refer to sins that the wandering person may have committed were he not restored.

At the end of his epistle, James powerfully reminds us that true faith—the faith that lays hold of heavenly wisdom—displays itself in love and mercy. When church members cease using their tongues to tear down

one another and instead use them to call others to repentance, the body of Christ fulfills her call to be a doer of the Word.

CORAM DEO (In the Presence of God)

All of us have an important part to play in the salvation of others. While we ourselves could never save another soul, God uses us as tools to help place His Word in the hearts of His elect. As Calvin says, “we must therefore take heed lest souls perish through our sloth, whose salvation God puts in a manner in our hands. Not that we can bestow salvation on them; but that God by our ministry delivers and saves those who seem otherwise to be nigh destruction.”

Open it

1. As a child, did you ever get lost or run away from home? What were you feeling in the moment? How did things turn out?

Read it

JAMES 5:19–20

Explore it

2. What title does James give his audience?
3. What is James worried people might wander away from?
4. What should other Christians do?
5. What two things will the believer do when he brings a wanderer back?

Apply it

It's always an anxious moment, especially for families and friends, when someone is reported missing in the wilderness. Search and rescue teams spring into action. We wait expectantly for any word of locating the missing person. It's a moment of great joy if they find the person alive and well, but a time of great sorrow when they're too late.

If you are a Christian, then you're a member of God's search and rescue team. But even though every believer is on the team, I find that many never respond to the call to go out into the storm and look for the lost. Can you imagine being lost in the woods, but no one came looking for you? When you finally stagger out to civilization, you ask why no one came looking.

One member of the search and rescue team says, "It was really cold and stormy, and there was a good show on TV. So I just prayed for you to be okay." Another says, "I wanted to be sensitive to your feelings. I thought you might be embarrassed if we came looking." Another says, "I wasn't sure you were *really* lost. It would be judgmental to imply that you actually were lost. Besides, it would be arrogant of me to say that I'm not lost. After all, we all have our own paths on the journey." That's *not* the kind of search and rescue team that I would want if I were lost!

I admit that what James tells us to do here is one of the most difficult things God asks us to do as Christians, namely, **Believers are responsible to help restore straying sinners to the truth.**¹

6. Looking back at the book of James, in what ways might his audience have been tempted to wander from the truth?

7. In what ways are the temptations in James day similar/different to the ones we face today?

¹ Sermon by Steve Cole Found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-25-god%E2%80%99s-search-and-rescue-ministry-james-519-20>

10. Give an example of when you have seen a person wander doctrinally or morally from the truth. What became of the person?

“Maintaining open, sharing, and praying relationships with other Christians will help keep believers from bottoming out in their spiritual lives. Such relationships help give the spiritual strength that provides victory over sin. And they also provide godly pressure to confess and forsake sins before they become overwhelming to the point of total spiritual defeat.... God has granted to all believers the ministry of reconciling wandering souls to Himself. When the evidence indicates a professed believer’s faith is not real, true Christians, knowing the terrible threat of eternal death that person faces, must make it their goal to turn him back from his sin to genuine saving faith in God.”³

11. Many Christians avoid this rescue ministry to wandering believers because confronting them is uncomfortable. What other reason might we give? Are these legitimate reasons for inactivity?
12. How are we to discern whether someone is wandering away from the truth? How do we balance being loving and becoming judgmental?

THIS MINISTRY IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ALL BELIEVERS, NOT JUST OF PASTORS.

James addresses the church (“My brethren”) and is general when he says, “and one turns him back.” He does not say, “One of the elders or pastors turns him back.” This ministry is the responsibility of every Christian who is walking with the Lord. In Galatians 6:1, Paul puts it this way, “*Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.*” To be “spiritual” means to be spiritually mature, to be walking in the Spirit and developing the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 22-23).⁴

³MacArthur, John. James (MacArthur Bible Studies) (Kindle Locations 1614-1618). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Sermon by Steve Cole Found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-25-god%E2%80%99s-search-and-rescue-ministry-james-519-20>

17. What thoughts do you have when you think about your multitude of sins being covered by Jesus Christ? How do you respond to this truth?
18. What person or people has God given you the role of watching over? What things should we do to foster a relationship that allows accountability and encouragement in the faith to be a reality?

SUMMING IT ALL UP

19. James is full of imperatives (doing) and light on indicatives (being). Why is it important for us as believers to hear such teaching and be challenged in such ways?
20. Some have questioned the spirituality of the book of James because of certain missing themes (salvation, gospel). What spiritual truths does James teach that carry huge implications for the believer and are necessary for our holiness?
21. Considering what you have learned in this study, take some time and summarize the book of James in one sentence.