



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Real Faith. Real Life.

Part 16: God's Search & Rescue Team
James 5:19–20 | Tim Badal | May 21, 2017

This is the last time we'll be looking at the book of James for this series we've called "Real Faith. Real Life." I pray that our time since the beginning of the year has been challenging to you as a follower of Jesus Christ.

James was written by Jesus' half-brother who came to have a profound relationship with his Brother as more than just a sibling—as one who realized Jesus was his Savior and the Lord of the world. He had seen his Brother die, go into a grave, and then come back to life. After that James devoted his life to following Jesus—all the way to eventual martyrdom for his faith. The letter was written to a group of Christians who, like us, were scattered all over the place. They had different jobs, lived in different neighborhoods—and he was calling them to live a real faith in the middle of the real moments in their lives.

As we've gone through this series, I've prayed that a couple things would happen in our church. My first hope was that we would really come to know both the writer of this book and his audience, and that we would see how God was changing them through His Word. We discussed some of the things this first-century audience was dealing with. Some of their situation was different than ours, but we also saw a lot that we had in common. It was helpful to see how this ancient audience lived out their faith in God as their Savior and Lord.

Second, I've prayed that during this study we would learn some things about ourselves. James says the Bible should act as a mirror in our lives, in which we can see some areas that perhaps need to be challenged and fixed. Perhaps we need to turn to God with confession, or perhaps there are certain disciplines that are lacking in our lives. As the Scriptures have confronted us, hopefully this has led us to seek improvement in these areas.

Most importantly, I hope you've seen the gospel and Christ Himself and that you've understood that we can do none of this on our own. We cannot live real faith in real life without Jesus empowering us by His Spirit. As we've heard James echoing his Brother's words in this letter, we can see that Jesus is the One Who enables us to live real faith, rather than just professing faith. Through Him we can become not just hearers of the Word, but also doers of it as well.

Any time we close out a series, I wonder: did we teach enough? Did we teach it clearly? Have we applied it well? But as I've listened to you talk, I'm blown away with how God has used James' letter to change lives. I'm looking forward to what He will be teaching us in our future series.

Let's close out this series by looking at the last two verses—James 5:19–20. But today we'll also look back at the book of Hebrews, which is right before James, where we'll see spelled out what James is talking about in these last two verses. But first, let's read today's passage:

¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ 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.

My title for this sermon is "God's Search & Rescue Team." One of the most under-appreciated branches of our military is the Coast Guard. We hear a lot about the Army, the Air Force, the Navy and the Marines, but we hear very little about the Coast Guard.



They've been around since the days of George Washington, having been established in 1790. Their job, as their name indicates, is to insure that our coast is guarded from foreign invaders or any peril the seas might bring. It was their job then, and it's still their job today. According to their website, the Coast Guard exists "for maritime safety, maritime stewardship and maritime search and rescue."

Today I want to focus on that last purpose, the idea of "search and rescue." The Coast Guard motto is this: "Always ready." The Coast Guard rescue team puts itself in harm's way, not because they enjoy going into difficult circumstances, but because they have to when someone is in peril and in need of rescue. According to their own audit report, the Coast Guard went on 50,000 search and rescue missions last year alone. That represented nearly 10,000 people who found themselves in life-threatening situations, and of these, roughly 9,000 were actually rescued, whereas about 700 died. In short, these people are life savers, rescuing people from places of trouble.

After Hurricane Katrina, TIME Magazine ran a feature story on the Coast Guard about this being the largest mission the Coast Guard had ever undertaken. During an interview, one of the captains of a search and rescue team said something I thought was unique: "In all other branches of the armed forces, it's all about mission. You train for war. But in the Coast Guard, our mission is people. If you take care of people, the mission will take care of itself." That idea got my attention: if we take care of people, the mission will take care of itself.

I believe James is saying we are part of God's search and rescue team. The mission of going out into the world to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and make disciples only works if we're looking for people who are lost. These last verses in James are a call to evangelism, but they are more than that. They also call for evaluation. We're going to consider what kind of person is wandering away. We're very quick to think of the teenager down the pew from us, or maybe our son or daughter or spouse. We're quick to think someone else is wandering. But we also need to ask, "Am I wandering? Am I in a place of spiritual peril and in need of rescue?"

1. James finishes his letter by giving a caution we all must heed.

Look again at James 5:19–20: "*My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 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.*" If we're not careful, we may mis-identify who James is talking about here. We need to ask: who is about to go astray? The answer is actually more complex than we might think. In fact, scholars struggle to interpret this passage.

We first notice that James is addressing "my brothers." He's done that eight times in his letter. This is a group he believes to be part of God's family. He says, "*If anyone among you*" —that is, in the church—*wanders from the truth....*" Yet he also identifies the wandering person as "*a sinner.*" Normally in the New Testament the followers of Christ are not identified as sinners, even though we may still sin. Because of our position in Christ, we are instead called saints.

So we have a problem. James is saying, "My brothers, if anyone among you—in the church—wanders away and someone brings him back, you cover a multitude of sins and you save his soul." This uses terminology that applies both to a Christian and to an unbeliever. What are we to make of this?

I believe James is saying there are some in the church who have a dead faith. They profess to believe in Jesus Christ, but they're not living it out. Perhaps they think that because they're part of the church and doing religious activities they're saved. But in fact they've wandered from the truth, which proves they were never saved in the first place. While they thought they were living in faith, James says their faith is actually dead.

Maybe James is thinking of something Jesus talked about in Matthew 7. In verses 22–23 He says that many will come to Him on the last day—the day of judgment,—and say, "Lord, Lord, did I not prophesy in Your Name? Didn't I cast out demons in Your name? Didn't I do all the religious things You told me to do?" But Jesus will shock them by responding, "Depart from Me—I never knew you."

We need to understand the division represented here. The person standing before Jesus truly believes they know Him. But Jesus says truthfully, "No, you didn't." This is a very important lesson that James is giving us. We need to test ourselves, because many times we presume something about ourselves that God doesn't agree with. There is a probability that some of us here will stand before God having deceived ourselves throughout our lives, thinking we're in the Kingdom, but Jesus will tell us, "No. No. In fact, you were not."

The sad reality is that in that moment it will be too late. You will not be ushered into a place of eternal bliss, but a place of destruction where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13:36–43). James therefore is closing out his letter by asking each of us to test our faith. We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). He says there is a real probability that some among us will wander away from the truth, and they will prove by that wandering that they were never saved in the first place. So what the church is supposed to do is run after them, just as Jesus left the 99 sheep to search for the one, and bring back the one who has gone astray (Matthew 18:10–14). We should be reminded never to presume something that God hasn't presumed for us. With salvation there are always "conditional clauses"—phrases that begin with "if." "You are My disciples if you continue obeying My commands" (John 14:15–31). "You are My disciples if you continue to abide in Me" (John 15:1–11). That word "if" is a condition.

We might say, "Well, I walked down the aisle. I raised my hand and wrote on the prayer card that I accepted Jesus as my Savior. I made a confession. I got baptized. I did all this stuff. But there's been no real change in me." Some of us are relying on something we did in the past to prove our salvation, not on our obedience in the present. James warns us to be careful, because maybe we have wandered away from the truth. This is both a reminder of an evaluation that needs to be done and the evangelism we're called to do.

So again, this refers to a person who is part of the church, who professes to be a believer, who would have assumed they were part of the brotherhood of Christ, but now has wandered away. The litmus test is this: when someone pursues them in their wandering, will they obey and return to a saving knowledge of the truth, or will they continue to wander away from God? Besides asking who the person is who's going astray, we also need to ask: is this happening today? Just because it was happening in James' day doesn't mean it's happening today. But why would people in his day who professed to be believers wander from the truth? The answer back then was probably persecution.

In the beginning of his letter, James mentions that the people were scattered all around. Why? They were refugees driven from their homeland because of their faith. Being a Christian was a cardinal vice in the eyes of the rulers in that day. It was an illegal activity and they were being hunted down. They were losing their property. They were separated from their families. They were being sent to far-off cultures where they didn't know the language, where they weren't in a body of believers. So at some point some of them decided being a Christian was too hard and wasn't worth it. Jesus hadn't come through in their hardship, so they were walking away. In my estimation, the problems in the first century almost gave people a noble reason to leave the faith. It was really hard being a Christian in that time, and we can understand how some might grow weary and be tempted to give up.

But what about now, in 2017? What about the Chicago land area? Is wandering still an issue? Today, with very little persecution here in our land, we need to ask if people are still wandering away. My belief is it's an even bigger problem today than it was in James' day. Here are some reasons why I think this is true:

Wandering is a problem today because our perspective on Christianity is wrong.

We have a warped view of Christianity, viewing it as going to a place. "Where's your church?" "I go to church in Sugar Grove." It's a place. The New Testament never speaks about the church as a place, but as a people. The Greek word for church is *ecclesia*, an assembly of people. So from that point of view, here's a church—it's all you people. Even if we were sitting in lawn chairs out in the grass with no roof over our heads, an assembly of Christians is the church. Church is family—a group of people to whom we belong. Not a place we go.

A hundred years ago, this would not have been an issue. Back then, everyone went to church in their own neighborhood. Travel wasn't easy; you could ride a horse for a few miles, but not much farther. Back then the church gathering was a central part of the fabric of people's lives. They went Sunday morning, Sunday night and on Wednesdays. Beyond that, they spent time with each other during the week. They went to the same school or worked together, because the town or neighborhood was a confined area. Today we've become commuters—for our work, for other activities and also for church. Now that we have cars, instead of going to church with the people we also do life with in our community, we go to church with strangers—people who never share our lives otherwise. With the church being a place we go, we become primarily spectators. We really don't know the people around us. This reality makes wandering very easy.

Someone who recently left our church told me, "Nobody has asked where we've been." I responded, "How involved were you here when you left?" They said, "We were there Sunday mornings." "Besides just sitting through the service, how much time did you spend talking to others?" "Well, maybe ten minutes." If you're only hanging around here for ten minutes, and you suddenly leave,

nobody's going to notice you're gone. That's because there's no connection; no shared life. Yes, the church can always be more hospitable, but you have to want to be known and involved. That's the only way it will happen. I know it's sometimes hard to engage, especially if you're an introverted person, but that's a reality.

Wandering is a problem today because church is low on our priority list.

We fill our lives today with so much stuff, so many activities. Studies have revealed that regular church attendance is at an all-time low, around 40%. People who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ and say they want to be at church are only actually attending about 45% of the time. We're doing better than that here. Our attendance by people who call Village Bible Church their home is at about 65%. That means on any given Sunday, a third of our church is not here. And with that kind of transition happening all the time, it's hard to know who our family is.

Someone mentioned that they were amazed at our Easter Sunday attendance, thinking we must have had tons of visitors. Just for this campus, our attendance was around 1,100 people. Our average Sunday attendance is about 700. This person thought we had 400 visitors! I replied, "No. We had about 100 visitors plus our entire church family, because everyone made a commitment to be here on Easter Sunday." Think about this: We had to add a service just to accommodate our regular family all showing up that day. I don't want to speak legalistically, but we are the "frog in the kettle" of culture. We've accepted a church reality that's quite different from the church in the New Testament. Church for us is no longer a high priority.

Buckle your seatbelts for this. One of the worst times in my life as a pastor is happening right now. I'm a shepherd and I want to see my sheep. I want to know that they're being taken care of. But everything is shutting down for the summer. Ninety percent of our ministries are ending this week or next. Why? Because people say they're busy. They're tired. They need some time off.

Nowhere in the five chapters in the book of James do we ever find him saying, "Hey, it's summertime everybody. We'll see you back in the fall." We've created a culture where church takes a back seat during the summer. I get that there are times and cycles, but as a pastor I worry that we'll neglect assembling with one another. Attendance is already dropping—just because the weather is nicer. I never see in the New Testament where that should be a consideration. Church for them was a priority. We should make it our priority too—not just to cross it off our list, but because assembling together is very important. Let's make sure during the summer months that we don't give church a lesser priority. Let's commit together that church will be lived out as a priority.

Wandering is a problem today because we see Christianity as a private matter.

Third, we consider Christianity to be private. This is a "Made in America" idea. We endorse rugged individualism. We believe we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We consider what we do to be a private matter. Because of this, we've moved Christianity from being personal to being private.

These are two very different things. Personal says we're on the hook for our choices and behaviors. Our parents aren't responsible. Our spouse can't exhibit faith for us. Our pastor can't do it. We each must bow the knee to Jesus for ourselves. Nevertheless, our faith should not be private. Private says, "My faith is my business; not yours." We might think we don't say that, but I'm contending that we do. We come into church with a smile, but we also wear a necklace with a big sign that says, "No trespassing." We'll talk sports. We'll talk weather. We'll talk about world events. But don't ask us about our marriages, or about the sins we struggled with this week. Don't ask about our spiritual disciplines. We say, "Don't go there. It's not your place. I'm a private person. Those things are between me and God." But the Bible never talks about our lives that way. James 5:16 tells us we're to pray for one another and confess our sins one to another. These are absent in our American Christian life, because we believe faith is a private matter which, is not true. A private faith is really no faith at all.

Wandering is a problem today because perseverance through Christian community is a lost theology.

Not only has our Christianity become private, perseverance through Christian community is a lost theology. Christianity is not simply about you—it's about us. Yes, we come to Christ personally, but the moment we do we have entered into a collective body. We live life together. That's why there are 59 "one another" commands in Scripture. That's why the church is here. We gather here on Sundays because it's not good enough for us to do Christianity on our own. We need one another. We need to encourage one another. We need to be kind to one another and serve one another. We need to admonish and even rebuke one another. We need to live in harmony with one another; be devoted to one another; pray for one another. We need to be truthful to one another. If

we are living out our faith by ourselves, then we're living a faith that is different from New Testament faith. The New Testament is filled with the understanding that to live out faith is to live it out with other people.

Yet we fail to do that, and here's one example of when it happens. In your bulletin today you'll find a colorful sheet of paper listing the places you can serve. You may be thinking, "Okay, the church has needs; that's nice." But I want you to realize there are people whose faith is dependent on your service to them. The numbers on that paper aren't made-up numbers. These numbers represent real specific needs and you'll notice that a majority of them involve our children and teens.

Why do we invest so much time and energy in our children and teens? It's because they're the most at risk for wandering away. They're the most at risk for not believing the claims of Scripture. They're the most at risk for leaving the faith. Study after study indicates that once teens go to college, a massive majority of them—even from evangelical churches—will have walked away from their faith by the time they graduate.

So our church needs help. We need "one anothers" to come alongside our children and teens to minister to them, teach them and admonish them so they can see real faith lived out in real life. If Village Bible Church didn't have a problem with the things we've been talking about, then each of these needs would have a zero beside it.

But we're too busy. Church isn't a priority. We think, "Hey, the kids are on their own. My faith is private—theirs should be, too." As a result, we have lost what it means to be the church of the living God. We're missing it. And in doing so, we're the frog in the kettle that doesn't understand that our Christianity is not the Christianity of the New Testament.

Turn for a moment to the book of Hebrews. Again and again, Hebrews talks about people who were eager to wander away. But the writer of Hebrews is urging them to stay, to be faithful, to persevere. Look at Hebrews 10, beginning in verse 23: "*Let us...*"—collectively, plural. Not by ourselves. "*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering...*"—without wandering away.

How do we remain steadfast? Verse 24: "*Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*" God is coming back and until then He wants us to gather with one another, serving one another, stirring one another up to love and good works.

Why? Because you are the way God is going to make sure I stay faithful. And I'm the way God is going to keep you faithful. My job is to use my gifts so you remain faithful, and God is calling you to use your gifts so I remain faithful. We need one another in our lives. As the hymn writer says, "Prone to wander, Lord, we feel it. Prone to leave the God we love."

As we gather each week, we're reminded why we shouldn't wander. We're reminded of the goodness and faithfulness of God. How are we reminded? Does a voice from heaven speak to us? "Hey, Village Bible Church, don't wander." No, God uses people like you to spur one another on, reminding and encouraging each other. We are touched by God through the hands and feet of Jesus. Maybe today you're wandering and you don't even know it. Maybe you're neglecting the faith and you're in a place of peril.

2. James gives us the root causes to such wandering.

What causes us to wander? It's important to know when we have wandered. The word wander is used twice in our text today. First it speaks of those who wander from the truth, and later we read that the sinner might be brought back from his wandering. The root word is the same, but it's used in different ways. The Greek word is *planeo*, which is also the source of our English word "planet." In ancient times, people looked at the skies and noticed that some stars never moved, but others did. The Big Dipper and the Little Dipper were always in the same place, but other "stars" would move around the sky. These were the planets in their orbits. From the view of these observers, who didn't understand orbits, the planets seemed to be wandering aimlessly around the sky. So they called them the "wanderers," or planets.

James also used this word in James 1:16, "*Do not be deceived.*" This implies that people wander from the truth because they have been deceived—by the devil, culture or some temptation in their lives. Something was drawing them away. In this verse the word is used in the "passive voice." They were being urged or tempted by some other entity to move away from truth—almost like a force or a gravitational pull was acting on them. We need to have grace for these people, in that they didn't just decide to move away from truth, something had enticed and drawn them away.

But when James speaks of the sinner's wandering in James 5:20, that word is in the "middle voice." This indicates that the drawing doesn't just come from the outside, but rather it's something the person is responsible for doing. So yes, at one point there was an external temptation. Maybe they were hanging out with some friends or involved in certain activities that drew them away from the people of God and what they knew to be true. But at some point the temptation moves into a justified decision. They make

the decision to leave church and stop following God's precepts, so they can "do their own thing." Usually this change involves a specific process, as we see in the book of Hebrews.

Our wandering begins with spiritual neglect.

Look first at Hebrews 2:1–3:

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

Step one is a drifting, a neglect. It means we allow spiritual cobwebs to accumulate in our lives. This isn't a matter of heinous sin. This is simply abandoning the spiritual disciplines we've been called to do faithfully. Be careful if you start to think, "There are better things to do on Sunday than be at church. There are better things to do each day than read my Bible or fellowship with God's people." That's spiritual neglect. It doesn't shipwreck your faith in the first week, but over time it accumulates. D.A. Carson puts it this way:

People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate 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 cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.

If we're not careful and diligent, this drifting will start to happen. You're either going one way or you're going the other. You're either deliberately heading toward God, full steam ahead, or you're drifting apart from Him through neglect.

Our wandering continues with spiritual insensitivity.

Turn next to Hebrews 3:12–13: *"Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God."* So what's the solution according to the writer of Hebrews? *"But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."* So you have stopped doing the necessary spiritual disciplines to strengthen your faith—prayer and study and fellowship. You're not living out the "one another" commands.

The next phase is that you are now spiritually insensitive. You're calloused. Those things that once burdened your heart no longer do. You used to miss church when you couldn't be there on Sunday, but now that you've been gone for a month, it doesn't seem to matter as much. The things that used to concern you about sin—the things you'd see on TV that would cut you to the heart—no longer affect you that way. You now laugh at those things, making light of the sin they represent.

Many of you know I work in the food service business in addition to pastoring. My employees often laugh because I can grab hot items that they need potholders to touch. They'll say, "Don't you have any feeling in your hands?" In a lot of ways, no, I don't. I've been around hot stuff and have burned myself enough that my hands are calloused to the temperatures that bother most people.

Spiritual insensitivity means that when you're around sin, it's no longer something that bothers you. It doesn't affect you like it used to. But when we grow calloused toward sin, we need someone else to say, "Hey, that should be burning your hand! You need to insulate yourself from that. It's dangerous. Even though you can't feel it much anymore, it's still sinful."

The next step in our wandering is spiritual dullness.

We move from spiritual neglect to spiritual insensitivity to spiritual dullness. Going ahead a couple more chapters in Hebrews, look at Hebrews 5:11. In my Bible there's a heading that says, "Warning against apostasy." Apostasy is wandering. Verse 11 says, *"About this [apostasy] we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing."* That word "dull" in the Greek literally means to become mule-headed, stubborn.

So now someone might approach you and say, "I noticed you haven't been in church that much. Is everything all right?" "Hey, it's none of your business. We've got things going on." Or it moves to, "We haven't seen you for the past couple months. You haven't been in small group. We miss you. How are things going?" "You know, we've got other things going on. Hey, at the end of the day, the world is God's home. So as long as I'm in the world, I'm in God's house. I can worship God on the golf course, right?" The next step is even more drastic: "Just stay out of my business."

The mule-headed picture is perfect, because any time someone gets close to you, you start kicking. "Stay away. It's none of your business. My faith is private. Who are you to judge me? Why don't you worry about your own stuff? Don't you have sins in your life

you need to worry about?" You've moved from neglect and insensitivity—now you're getting upset. Now you're putting up defense mechanisms that are fighting against the very people who are trying to prevent you from wandering farther and farther from the truth.

The final step in our wandering is flagrant rebellion.

This takes us to Hebrews 10:26–27, which are very scary verses: *"For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries"* of God. Wow!

What the writer of Hebrews is saying is, "You've progressed from neglecting spiritual disciplines to developing an insensitivity to sin, which no longer bothers you. Now if anybody says anything, you're so dull of hearing and stubborn that you won't hear when God's people try to warn you. Your final step has become flagrant rebellion." In this phase your attitude is this: "I don't want anyone's help. I don't care about you guys. Go do your little church thing. I'm enjoying the world. I'm enjoying my sin." The response of the church should be: "Beware! You're heading toward hell."

Why is there no longer a sacrifice for sins? The writer of Hebrews is saying, "When a person has been with you and now no longer is, there's no new way to bring them back." In other words, the gospel no longer works. They've been there, done that. They've heard it. They know Jesus saves people from sin. They know they're supposed to repent and turn back to God. They know all this. It's not like we've got a different bullet in the chamber that's going to help in this situation. The only answer we've got is that Christ's sacrifice is the solution to sin—and that person has rejected that. He might previously even have served as a teacher in the church. But there's no new way to win them now. All you have left to do is to warn them: "You'd better turn around, because you're on your way to hell. You're headed toward a fiery judgment from God." We have to scare them. We aren't scaring them with empty threats. We're scaring them with the reality of verse 31: *"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."* Don't go there.

We should ask ourselves some questions today. First, "Am I wandering? Is there some spiritual neglect in my life? Is there insensitivity? Is there dullness? Might there even be flagrant rebellion?" Most of this isn't something visible through our body language; it's something in our hearts. We know where we are and what's going on in our hearts. The Bible says people like this have wandered in two respects. At one point they were among the people of God, but have wandered from them. They have also wandered from both the doctrines of truth and the morals of truth found in God's Word. Usually it starts with doctrine—our view of God is skewed—and then our activities become sinful. So ask yourself, "How do I view God? How do I view God's people? How do I view my lifestyle? Does it honor God or have I wandered into sin?"

The second question we must ask is this: "How well do I know the people of God who are around me? Can I discern whether these things are taking place in their lives?" Or have you bought into the idea that church is a private thing, just a place where you go and you're not to be concerned about anyone else?

3. James tells us this is our calling as believers.

Our third point today is that we've been called to care for one another. James now brings another character in from stage left: *"My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth..."*—that's the first individual—*"...and someone brings him back..."*—that's the second person—*"let him..."*—the rescuer—*"...know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."*

James is concluding his letter with a deeply theological reality. What the rescuer is doing is something we usually credit to God. The rescuer is described as doing two things: he saves the person's soul and he covers a multitude of sins. These are things that everywhere else in Scripture are said to be something God does. James is making it clear that the rescuer—you who are living out the "one another" commands and are going after a wanderer—enters into a God-like activity. These are God's works, but somehow He has let you be part of what He's doing.

How does this take place? John Piper uses this illustration, which I think is great. God, being the lumberjack, has the job of cutting down trees. How does He do this? He uses an ax. Like the lumberjack who uses an ax to cut down trees, God uses us to go after wanderers. Who brings them back? Well, God does. How does He do it? By using you. He uses people who are around the wanderer to go after them. And He says, "When you do that, you get to say, 'I helped to save that person's soul. I helped cover a multitude of sins.'" It's just like the ax would get to say, "I cut down trees." Did we save the soul by ourselves? No. But God uses us in such a way that in concert together, we are able to save the wanderer and cover them from a multitude of sins.

Think about it this way: Saving a soul is rescuing them. It means leaving where we are and going to where they are. That's exactly what Jesus did. He left heaven, the safe and comfortable place, and He went to the dangerous place and made His dwelling among us.

We too are called to leave the place where we're safe and move to a place that is uncomfortable. But there are three excuses that keep us from doing this:

1. We've not been invited. But remember, no one invited Jesus to our earth either. No one was saying, "Come, Jesus. We're sinners in need of grace. Come." Remember in the Garden after Adam and Eve sinned—did they want to see God then? No, they tried to hide from Him. We might not want to be involved in people's lives because we're comfortable in our lives and we haven't been invited to speak into their lives.
2. We don't think confrontation is loving. We wouldn't want someone else to confront us, so why should we confront them?
3. We don't think it's any of our business.

Think about these three excuses we make. We don't want to intrude; we don't think confrontation is loving and we don't think it's our business. Suppose your house is on fire. The firemen are already in the house when you pull up to your driveway. Would you say, "Hey. Who said you could go into my house? Nobody invited you here. You got mud on my carpet. You can't just barge into someone's home and think you can put out a fire. Who are you to judge that my house is on fire? Maybe your house is on fire. Maybe you should go check your house. Don't worry about my house."

No. Firemen aren't going to sit outside, watching a house burn down, thinking, "Nobody invited us in. We wouldn't want to barge in or intrude." No, they see a fire and they enter into it, because they recognize that it needs to be put out. Christians need to realize that when we see someone about to be destroyed, we need to act. Yes, we might step on someone's toes—and that's why we act with gentleness and respect. That's why we must check our lives first before we barge into someone else's.

We should never think, "Well, I'm a sinner and they're a sinner, so what is there to say?" That's why we need to confess our sins one to another. We need to get involved in one another's lives, because our spiritual livelihood depends on it. As a result, the Bible says we will "cover a multitude of sins." The idea of saving is a go-between—between God and the wandering person. When we fail, the last thing we want to do is see the people whom we have failed.

When we rescue the wanderer, what we do—both for God and for that person—is we say to God, "This is one of Your children. Don't be harsh with them. Be merciful. You are a forgiving and loving God." Why do we do this? Does God forget, or does His anger get out of control? No. We are going to God on behalf of the offender, seeking His mercy and grace. It's a reminder to them that they are loved and cared for; we're interceding on their behalf.

But there's a problem that remains. What the wanderer has done is truly ugly and heinous. Some wanderers never come back because they feel so guilty and broken, thinking they will never be accepted. They leave, because they see what they've done as being unpardonable. How could they ever be restored?

Remember John Mark? Young John Mark was on a missionary journey with Paul. We don't know what he did, but Paul was done with him. He decided John Mark was of no good use. When Barnabas sought to give John Mark another chance, it resulted in Paul and Barnabas parting ways. So Barnabas took John Mark and over time John Mark's reputation was rebuilt. So eventually we read Paul's words, "Bring John Mark with you. He'll be of great use to me" (Acts 15:36–41 and 2 Timothy 4:11).

My dad is from the Middle East, so of course my grandparents are as well. My Grandma on my dad's side was the sweetest grandma in the world. I never heard her say anything bad about anybody or anything. Picture the nicest, littlest grandma—that was my Grandma Badal. She was four-foot-five. I would go to hug her and I'd miss her.

When we children would visit her house, we would inevitably get into some kind of craziness and break something of Grandpa's. Maybe it was his TV or something on his workbench—and the dads would come. The dads would be hollering at us, all angry. But my little Iraqi Grandma would come running in, getting between us kids and the dads. She would use a Turkish phrase that I remember to this day: "Vermiessa!" That means, "Don't be harsh with them! Take it easy. Settle down." She was saying to the dads, "I know you want to kill them. But I'm not going to let you. I'm going to intervene on their behalf. They're just kids."

Well, when I was seven years old we were in the same house with that same grandma at a family gathering. My parents had just bought a new car. Back then the cars didn't have all the safety features they now have. Some of you remember that back in the day you could put a car into gear without a key. There was no locking mechanism.

My cousins and I were playing around in the car and I said, "Watch me. I can drive." I started making the noise, "Vrroom, vrroom, vrroom!" And I said, "Watch. This is what my dad does." I grabbed the gear shift and moved it into gear—into neutral. My grandparents lived in Boulder Hill and their driveway was sloped. The car started to move. It started to move quite a bit, because it was quite a slope. And when we got to the street, we heard a bang! Behind us was a brand new Oldsmobile. The two windows shattered. The doors couldn't be opened. And all my cousins ran for the hills.

My dad and two uncles come running out with my Grandpa. There I was, sitting in the front seat. I'm going to tell you something—I've never been so scared in my life. I thought, "I've done it. I've done the unpardonable sin. Not only is my dad mad, but my two uncles are mad. My Grandpa's mad." And to get a grandpa mad....well, back in the day, grandpas weren't as nice as they are today. So I had the holy trinity of angry dads mad at me.

My dad took me to the back room and was yelling at me. We didn't have a lot of money and I know he was wondering how he would pay for that brand new car to be fixed. Then the neighbor came out. He was angry and yelling at Dad. I felt like the whole world was collapsing upon me. Then Dad said, "Just wait 'til you get home, son. Oh, wait 'til you get home." And then he left. I remember sitting there and I was losing it. I was bawling my eyes out. You know a kid's really, really sorry when they start hiccupping. I just couldn't stop crying. I didn't want to see anybody. I remember very vividly that I wanted to dig a hole and never be seen again. I had failed. I had blown it.

Then Grandma Badal came in and sat next to me. I was totally unhinged. She said, "Listen. I love you. Oh, Tim, I love you so much. Your cousins love you. Your aunts love you. And your mom loves you." I sobbed, "What about my dad and my uncles...?" "I don't know, son. That's still open. But we love you."

Then she said, "C'mon." I said, "I don't want to go out there. Grandma, don't make me go out there. I don't want to be out there." She took me into the bathroom and with a warm washcloth she wiped my face. She helped me get my composure back and she said, "We're going to go sit." In a Middle Eastern family, we sit around the table. I don't know if you've noticed from my physique, but we eat a lot. Everybody was sitting around the table. I walked in and everybody got quiet. My Grandma said to my Grandfather, who always sat at the head of the table, "Get up." She put me at the head of the table. In the Middle Eastern culture you serve the patriarch—the oldest man in the family—first. But Grandma said, "Tim is going to be served first." Then she looked at the family and said, "Tim has done wrong, but in family, we forgive things. We've all made mistakes. We're going to show Tim our love." Even my dad had to swallow a whole lot of his anger—and I was restored. Let me tell you something. I've never forgotten that. I remember the depths of what I felt. Then the feeling of being received back after doing wrong was glorious.

So when we rescue a wanderer, we're bringing them back to the flock. People will say, "Hey, that guy did this. That guy lost his testimony through that." We should respond, "He sought forgiveness. He's repented of his sins. Our job is to bring him back and cover that multitude of sins, telling him, 'You stand forgiven. Now be restored.'" We have a job to do. God has a rescue mission for each one of us, but we have to know the people around us. We have to know our family. We've got to know the key steps by which people wander away so we can go after them. And when we bring them back, we're going before God and before our fellow brothers and sisters, reminding them that this wanderer has been forgiven. Jesus says that when we do this, a party breaks out in heaven. There's rejoicing in heaven.

Let me close with this. One major event in World War II stands above all others as seemingly miraculous, accomplished through the efforts of everyday people. In the spring of 1940, Hitler's armored tank division of Panzers was overrunning France. The Dutch had already surrendered, and so had the Belgians. More than 250,000 British soldiers and another 100,000 Allied troops were now stuck with their backs to the wall on the coast of France in the channel port of Dunkirk. They faced immanent capture and probable death. Hitler's troops, only a few miles away in the hills of France, closed in for an easy kill.

The Royal Navy had enough ships to pick up only 17,000 men and take them to safety. Parliament was given word that they should brace for a national tragedy and heavy losses of life. Then while the troops were waiting for their impending death, a bizarre fleet of ships began to appear on the horizon of the English Channel: fishing boats, tug boats, life boats, row boats, sail boats, yachts. Even an island ferry named Grace Fields and the American Cup challenger Endeavor were all seen on the English Channel—all manned by civilians, speeding for a rescue. This rag-tag armada rescued the remaining troops of over 300,000 and returned them safely to shore. Winston Churchill said it was the single greatest search and rescue mission ever done in the history of mankind. He said because a group of people saw a need and came to the rescue was the number one reason that the Allied Forces were able to destroy Hitler and the Nazi powers.

Brothers and sisters, we all run the risk of wandering. James closes out his letter by telling us there are some who are trapped, some who are in danger of being captured by the evil one. We the church are God's armada. We are the ones with all kinds of ships, all kinds of shapes, all kinds of sizes, with all kinds of personalities and backgrounds. God has called us to go rescue the lost. The question is: will you do it? James finishes his letter with a calling—a calling to seek and to rescue that which is lost. That's what living real faith in real life is all about.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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