

My Brother's Keeper

Rebuilding a Broken Church Culture Part 9
James 5:19-20 11-22-2015

Summary: It was more fitting to use the drought prayer rather than the resurrection prayer of Elijah in this context because the focus is on bringing refreshment and renewal from God through repentance, not just physical healing. And in this case, you are the rain! We all wander and need to be rescued. Rescuing means simply turning the person back in the direction (direction, not perfection). Do it through prayer, and do it gently and humbly. Realize what is at stake: their eternal soul!

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|---|----|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Prone to Wander | 2 |
| Why the Rain Prayer Instead of the Resurrection Prayer? | 2 |
| The End of Judgment..... | 2 |
| You Are the Rain..... | 4 |
| Who to Rescue: The Wanderer | 4 |
| Even Pastors Need Rescue | 5 |
| Move Toward the Sinner..... | 5 |
| How to Rescue: Pray and Gently Turn Them | 5 |
| Prayer | 5 |
| Turning..... | 5 |
| Humbly and Gently | 6 |
| Build Friendships So You Can Rescue | 7 |
| Catch It Early | 7 |
| What to Watch for..... | 8 |
| Why to Rescue: It Will Save Their Soul from Death | 8 |
| What Is at Stake: Eternal Life | 8 |
| The Means of Preservation: The Church..... | 9 |
| Save | 9 |
| Cover a Multitude of Sins | 9 |
| The Importance of Saving Lives..... | 10 |
| Conclusion: Restoration! | 10 |
| Culture of Encouragement..... | 10 |
| Application Questions (James 1:25) | 11 |

James 5:19 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Introduction

If there were some kind of budget crisis in the kingdom of God, so that all non-essential personnel got sent home, what would happen to you? How important is your job in the church? Would you be one of the ones who got sent home, or would you be part of the skeleton crew that stayed on to keep things operational? What would you do if God came up to you and gave you a job offer for some position in the kingdom that was *critically* important? What if God gave you a job that involved saving lives? In the last two verses of the book, James lets us know about a job opening in the kingdom, and in verse 20 he tells us that anyone who does this job will save people from death.

James 5:19 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

One of the most meaningful, powerful, world-changing things a human being could possibly do is to rescue a wandering sinner.

Prone to Wander

Wandering is a real problem. James warned us back in chapter 1 not to wander. In the discussion about temptation he says:

James 1:16 Don't be deceived, my dear brothers.

That word translated **deceived** is this same word for **wander**. So he warned us at the outset – don't wander. We have to be warned about that because we are all so prone to wander. For the past 250 years the church has been singing, "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love."¹ There is such a thing as spiritual decay. The person in this room who is the closest to God - the person with the strongest faith, the greatest personal holiness the deepest love for God – whoever that person is, could be wandering from the truth six months from now,. Wandering is such a common experience that we actually sing about it. Even after his warning in chapter 1, and all of his instruction throughout the book, James knows it is still going to happen. So in the closing verses of the book he sets up a search and rescue mission. James is handing the baton to us. He spent the whole book pulling everybody back on track, and now he wants us to pick up where he left off and keep that work going indefinitely.

Why the Rain Prayer Instead of the Resurrection Prayer?

The only passage in the entire New Testament that teaches about the topic of physical healing is James 5:14-16. And the message of those three verses is basically this: "Pray for it." That is his instruction to the church about physical healing – ask God for healing, and He will answer that prayer, because prayer is powerful and effective. And to illustrate that, James pointed us to Elijah. Now let me ask you a question that we didn't get to last week. If you are writing a passage on how God will answer prayers for healing, and you decide to use Elijah as your example, wouldn't the logical thing be to use the time when Elijah prayed for God to raise the widow's son from the dead? That is the ultimate example of someone praying for healing and getting the prayer answered. What a perfect story to use for this context of praying for healing. And it's not like James didn't think of it – it is recorded in the same chapter as the drought. In fact, it is part of the same story - it happened during the drought. So why would James focus on stopping and starting the rain instead of on the resurrection?

I believe the answer to that question is going to help us understand the last two verses of the book of James. What was that drought all about in 1 Kings? It was God's judgment on Israel for worshiping idols.

Deuteronomy 11:13 if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today ... 14 then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains ... 16 Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away ... 17 Then the LORD ...will shut the heavens so that it will not rain

James actually alluded to that passage back in verse 7 when he talked about the autumn and spring rains. The drought that Elijah prayed for was for this exact reason – judgment on the people for turning away from God. And that is probably also the significance of the 3 ½ years.

The End of Judgment

James mentions that time period even though there is nothing in the First Kings account about 3 ½ years.² That amount of time had very clear significance for the Jews. During the time in between the Old

¹ From "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing"

² The account in 1 Kings 18:1 says that Elijah went to Ahab in the third year, but that just measures the time that Elijah had been in Zarephath and does not include the time prior to his arrival there. The full 3 ½ year period wasn't recorded in 1 Kings – James got it from Jesus (Lk.4:25).

Testament and the New Testament, there was a time when God brought horrendous judgment on the Jews for 3 ½ years under Antiochus Epiphanes. He committed terrible atrocities against the Jews, but after 3 ½ years God brought deliverance. That deliverance in many ways shaped Jewish culture at the time of Jesus. It was an extremely famous, well known event, so much so that if you just walked up to a Jew at that time and said, “3 ½ years,” he would immediately think of that time of judgment that ended in marvelous deliverance from God. It is kind of like in our country if someone says “Four score and 70 years ago...” - Right away everyone thinks of Abraham Lincoln and the Gettysburg address. That is how they were with the number 3 ½ years. So when James specifies that length of time, he brought to the readers’ minds devastating judgment followed by marvelous deliverance and restoration from God.

The whole point of everything God was doing with the drought and the showdown with the prophets of Baal – the public humiliation of Baal when he couldn’t send fire to burn their sacrifice, and then Yahweh sends fire that burns up the sacrifice, the stones, the dirt, and the water – all of that had one purpose. Right before the fire came down from heaven, this is what Elijah prayed:

1 Kings 18:37 Answer me, O LORD ... so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

In the Greek translation that word for **turning** is the same word James uses in our verse today. That entire drought ordeal was all about turning hearts back to God, so that instead of judgment, there could be restoration, renewal, and blessing.

So can you see how the drought story is the perfect illustration for James to use here? The whole book James has been pointing out all kinds of sins in the church - pride, selfishness, injury, grumbling, complaining, gossiping, fighting, quarreling - and at the end of chapter 3 he said that those sins were resulting in disorder and every evil practice. The church was a disorderly, chaotic mess. And it was experiencing judgment from God. Some of those sins were evidently resulting in physical sickness, which is why James says **confess your sins to one another ... so that you may be healed**. So the church, or at least portions of the church, were experiencing judgment from God because of sin. And the closing section of James is all about how to fix the problem. How to restore this broken, messed up church. It starts with personal integrity in verse 13 and then prayer - private prayer, and praying for one another. Pray for healing and for spiritual restoration and forgiveness of sins. If you do that, those prayers will be powerful and effective. Powerful and effective to do what? What is going to happen if we pray like this?

What is going to happen is the same thing that happened when Elijah prayed at the end of that 3 ½ year judgment from God. God sent rain. The drought was God’s judgment, the rain signaled the end of judgment and the beginning of favor.

What will happen if we confess our sins and pray for restoration in the church? We will receive God’s favor. Rain is such a beautiful picture of God’s favor. We know James has that in mind because in verse 18 he not only mentions the rain, but the effect of the rain.

18 ...heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

Life-giving rain came down from God and watered the earth and made it bud and flourish and thrive, and the crops begin to grow, and there was food and prosperity in the land again. And that is what God wants to do in a dried up, broken church. He wants to bring refreshment and renewal and life and growth and spiritual health and prosperity. He wants to replace the desert of our favoritism and selfishness with the lush green plants of love. He wants to replace our ugly pride with beautiful humility so He can lift us up. He wants to replace our desolate wasteland of complaining and grumbling with a paradise of joy and praise and thanksgiving. He wants to replace our love for the world with love for Him. He wants to bring healing and restoration and refreshment and forgiveness of sins and hope and joy and new life into the church.

The illustration of raising that child from the dead would have been fine if James’ only focus was physical healing. But his bigger focus is on spiritual restoration. The purpose of the physical healing is to illustrate the greater reality of spiritual healing.

And so these last two verses are not some abrupt change of subject. They are the climax of this whole section - the spiritual restoration of a wandering sinner.

You Are the Rain

And here is what is really cool: what is your role in this thing? You are the rain! Do you realize that? Healing, restoration, renewed life, salvation, forgiveness of sins – all that comes from God. That is like the earth producing crops. But what method does God use to bring that about? You! You are the rain! You are the vehicle God wants to use to bring times of refreshment and renewal and new life. *That's* an important job! If all the nonessential personnel get sent home, fine, but the last people we can afford to lose are the people who do this.

And if you are wanting a really important job in the church you are in luck, because it just so happens there are several openings. There are always openings for this job, because there are always people wandering from the truth. You don't even have to apply. You don't have to be interviewed. You don't have to be appointed. You don't need permission from the elders. All you have to do is spot someone who is wandering, and bring him back.

The structure of this passage is very simple – James gives us the *who*, the *how*, and the *why*. First, who are we supposed to rescue? Answer: anyone who is wandering from truth.

Who to Rescue: The Wanderer

Sometimes it starts with beliefs and moves to behavior – they get into bad doctrine, like the “free grace” movement, and that leads to them becoming loose morally. Or it goes the other way – first they get into some sin, and then they adjust their theology to allow for that sin. But whatever direction it goes, if the person is wandering, we have the responsibility to rescue them. We must not only be doers of the Word, but we must be intentional about seeing to it that our brothers and sisters are also doers of the Word. James is giving us the answer to Cain's question: “Am I my brother's keeper?” Answer: Yes! We have responsibility for one another.

Ezekiel 3:18 When I say to a wicked man, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. **19** But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself.

He will die either way, but you will be off the hook if you warned him.

20 “Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil ... he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. **21** But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning, and you will have saved yourself.”

If you fail to warn him and he dies, his blood is on your hands. If you warn him and he doesn't listen, you are innocent. If you warn him and he turns, you just saved his life. That is what Paul was talking about in Acts 20:26 when he said **I am innocent of the blood of all men**. If they died in their sin, it wasn't his fault because he warned them.

Proverbs 24:11 Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter.

This is your responsibility. If you leave this work to the pastors, this will be one sick church. We could hire ten full time pastors and they wouldn't be able to fulfill all the ministry needs of any given week at Agape. The entire congregation has to be doing this.

James 5:19 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

It is not just shepherds who go after the wandering sheep; it is everyone. In fact, it might be the pastors that are wandering.

Even Pastors Need Rescue

We have hired Crossroads Reconciliation Group next month so they can help us try to reconcile with some people who left the church earlier this year. A few days ago someone told us that some folks in the congregation heard about that meeting and asked if they could come so they could voice their concerns about the elders. We were taken aback by that, because we really thought everything was ok between us and the people who are still here. We didn't know there were still ongoing concerns. And here is what we want you to know – you don't have to wait for some special meeting. If you see the elders drifting off track, you are not only welcome to come point it out to us, but, according to this passage, you don't have any choice. This passage applies to anyone who wanders, including wandering pastors.

James 5:19 My brothers, if any one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

If you see one of us wandering from the truth, you have just as much responsibility to rescue us as anyone else.

Move Toward the Sinner

James calls for movement *toward* the sinner, not away. What should you do when someone in the church wanders into sin? Ostracize them? Abandon them? Punish them? Gossip about them? No, move toward them and rescue them.

How to Rescue: Pray and Gently Turn Them

So that is the *who*. What about the *how*? You see someone drifting into sin, wandering away from the truth - how do you go about rescuing that person?

Prayer

Obviously, from the context, we know that step 1 is prayer. Pray for spiritual healing. Everything we have learned over the past month in this passage about praying for restoration – put that to work and pray your heart out that God would grant the person repentance.

If God doesn't do that, then nothing you say or do will change the person's heart.

Turning

So you pray like crazy for the person – then what? James doesn't give much specific instruction about that, except for the word he uses to describe the goal.

20 Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way...

Your goal is to turn the person. Think about that for a minute. If you are trying to restore a person from sin, how do you know when you have succeeded? How much victory over sin does he have to have before he is officially restored? How sin-free does his life have to be? Answer: there is no certain level of holiness the person has to attain. He just has to turn - change direction. You achieved your goal when that

person is moving toward God instead of away from God. Success is measured in terms of *direction*, not *perfection*. As soon as that person is traveling in the right direction instead of the wrong direction, you have succeeded. Even if he is really stumbling a lot, he is still not having very much victory, lots of failures – that’s not the issue. The issue is, is he repentant or unrepentant? Is he walking away from God or toward God?

The person does not have to attain to any certain standard other than to be moving in the right direction. When we make the standard a certain level of success in the Christian life, that causes all kinds of problems. First, it will turn that person into some kind of second-class citizen in the church until he reaches that standard. And he will be discouraged until he reaches that standard. And you will be discouraged until you reach that standard. And then when you finally do reach it, you will become proud and look down on the people who haven’t gotten there yet.

Listen, no matter where you are in your walk with the Lord, if you are moving in the right direction, God is pleased with you. And when someone in the church wanders off the path, what we are shooting for is repentance. As soon as that happens, we can celebrate. We don’t have to wait until they make up all their lost ground, or attain to a certain level of holiness or success in Christian living. Every Christian who is moving in the right direction is doing great - even though they still have a long way to go.

Humbly and Gently

And I think one more thing that we could add just from the overall teaching of the book of James is that our approach must be loving, humble, and gentle. We need to approach each other with the wisdom that comes from heaven which is...

James 3:17 ...first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

When you see someone wandering into sin, don’t run in with your Matthew 18 guns blazing, ready to excommunicate them as soon as possible.

Galatians 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught by a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.

Don’t think you are above falling into that same sin. And don’t think of yourself as somehow better than that person. Go after them in the way that you would want someone to come after you. Spurgeon: “I have seen a wandering sinner hunted down like a wolf.” He goes on to describe how the attitude of the people in the church destroyed that person. Remember, you are not hunting down a wolf – you are rescuing a fellow sheep.

It might help to remind yourself that the goal is that God would cover over his sins (v.20). God is eager to cover them; you should be too. If you are a sinful person, then you have no business being harsh with any other sinner – even if you happen to be an Old Testament high priest.

Hebrews 5:1 Every high priest is selected from among men and ...2 is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray (wandering), since he himself is subject to weakness. 3 This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.

Pray for the person, and then humbly, gently, lovingly do whatever you can to bring him to repentance.

That is not to imply it will be easy. Sometimes it’s easy, but rarely. Most of the time it is some of the most exhausting work there is. I think some of the times I have been most fatigued and exhausted in my life are after a few hours of pleading with a wandering sinner to come back. There is nothing enjoyable about it. But it is some of the most important and rewarding work you will ever do.

Build Friendships So You Can Rescue

So which people are you responsible to restore? The people you see wandering. So if you want to have an important job in the kingdom, get to know some people so that you will be there for them when they start to wander. The closer your relationship with the person, the more effective you will be in rescuing them. This is one reason why it's good for a church to do retreats and picnics and social events and workdays as well as small groups and mentorships - all the various ways we meet people and begin to build friendships. Instead of looking for someone who will make a great friend for you, just focus on befriending someone who really needs a friend. You might end up hitting it off a lot better than you think. But even if you don't, it's still worth doing because you are putting yourself in a position to be close to someone so that they actually have a friend who can catch them when they fall. There are some people in this church who don't have anybody. They could wander from the truth and no one would even notice until they are 500 yards off the path and by then it will probably be too late. But if you have a friendship with them, you can catch the wandering early, while it is still easy to restore them. And according to James, the difference that will make will be eternity in heaven for that person instead of eternity in hell. You will literally save their soul from death.³

There are some people who need to be rescued by you. If I try to do it, it won't work. You're not responsible for everyone. Maybe just one or two. But there is someone out there who you could reach that none of the rest of us could. If it is left up to the rest of us, we won't realize they are wandering until it's too late. Or we will realize it, but we won't be able to reach them because we can't relate to them like you can. Maybe you are the one who needs to do it for that one particular person, because you have actually wandered down that same sinful path before, and you can tell them exactly what's coming. When David repented he said, "God, if You wash me clean, then I will teach transgressors your way, and sinners will turn back to you" (Ps 51:13). Some sinners can only be turned by someone who has already been down the devastating path of that particular sin.

Catch It Early

And not only are friendships important so that you can be there to catch them when they fall, but also so that they can catch you. That's another reason why privacy is so toxic and deadly. We all stumble in many ways, but the more exposed your life is, the earlier in the process you can be rescued when you wander. If you have a totally private life, then we are not even going to know you need rescuing until it's too late. It is crucial to have one or two friendships that are close enough so that all you have to do is take a couple steps off the path and they catch it right away, before you do too much damage to your heart.

Some of you are wandering right now. There is something in your life you know God isn't pleased with, and yet you have no intention of doing anything different tomorrow. And it's probably something pretty small. We generally don't wander away in one, big, dramatic moment. It is always subtle at the beginning, which is why we usually catch it way too late.

If it's me, I'm begging you, catch me early. I hate it when people do that. I hate it – it's painful. It's embarrassing, sometimes it makes me mad, it's humiliating – but I praise God for it. Where would I be if godly men and women hadn't loved me enough to reel me back in the countless times I've wandered? If I start wandering from the truth grab me by the leg and pull me back.

³ And if you say, "Oh, I'm not worried about that. If I don't do it, God will just send someone else to do it" – then you are right back into the heresy of saying human actions don't matter because the sovereignty of God always just overrides them. I say that's heresy because every chapter in the Bible screams the truth that our actions do matter and do make a difference on outcomes. We are not the ultimate determiners of outcomes – God is. But even though we aren't ultimate determiners, we are real determiners. Our role is secondary, but it is a real, crucial role nonetheless, and to deny that would require that you deny the clear teaching of this verse. Because James doesn't say, "Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way doesn't really do anything because God would have seen to it that the sinner turned with or without your influence." He doesn't say, "Only God can turn a sinner from the error of his way, and so if you think your influence did it, you're kidding yourself." What he says is, "Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way saves his soul from death."

What to Watch for

If we really loved one another, and we really believed that this is actually a matter of spiritual life and death, I think we would probably be a little bit nosier than we are. We would stick our noses in each other's lives a little more than we do. Someone in your prayer group misses a few weeks in a row, you give them a call.

"Oh, we're okay. We just went on vacation, and then got sick – we'll be back."

"Okay, great. Glad you're okay."

But then they're gone four out of the next eight weeks. Back on the phone, "Be honest with me, what's going on?"

One sign of spiritual drift is when temporal things start to become a higher priority than eternal things. The kids' sports or school activities starts to become more important than church. Priorities start drifting in the direction of the world.

"You didn't get your homework done? Ok, you can't go to youth group tonight."

Why don't they ever say, "You didn't memorize your verses for youth group? Ok, you can't go to school tomorrow"? Temporal, earthly things becoming a higher priority than eternal things is a warning sign.

Another one is when a person becomes focused on how everyone is failing to love them properly.

Another one is adjustments in their doctrine of God in the direction of permissiveness. "I like to think of God as..." followed by a whole bunch of flowery theological language that basically amounts to God winking at sin.

Another very common one is adjustments in their doctrine of grace that start to pit grace against obedience to God's law. Grace becomes defined as God cutting me some slack so I don't have to strive to obey His law. Let's move close enough to one another so that we will be able to pick up on the signs of spiritual drift before it's too late.

Why to Rescue: It Will Save Their Soul from Death

And this is the main point of the passage.

19 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

The only command in that whole passage is the first word in verse 20 – **remember**. You could translate it **understand this** or **know this** or **realize this**. He never explicitly commands us to rescue the wandering sinner. He just commands us to realize something. Realize what? Realize what is at stake. Realize what a monumentally, eternally significant thing it is if you do this. If we obey the command and realize, understand, think, grasp in our minds what is at stake – that will be all the motivation we need to do what James wants us to do here. So let's do that. What is at stake exactly?

What Is at Stake: Eternal Life

20 realize this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Some people have looked at verse 19 and noticed that James is talking to brothers here.

19 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth...

Some interpreters have seen that and said, "Wait a minute, if this is talking about Christians, then the death in verse 20 must mean physical death, not spiritual death." But that doesn't work, because James is clear that if you restore this person you are saving his soul from death, not his body. Make no mistake – this is talking about eternal damnation. That is what is at stake here if this happens or doesn't happen. If

this brother doesn't get turned around, his soul will perish and he will die without a covering for his sins. This should put the utmost seriousness in every ministry we ever engage in. If you have some theological belief system that tells you a brother can't possibly sin his way into hell, you need to let your theology be corrected by this verse. We will never have the urgency Scripture calls for if we don't grasp what is at stake.

The effects of sin can become so numbing and deadening that you can actually get to the point where it has so destroyed your affections that when you look back over your shoulder at God's way, what you see is so unattractive to you that you will never return without someone else's help.

The Means of Preservation: The Church

"But hasn't God promised to preserve my faith?"

Yes, He has, but how does He do it? In large measure He does it by means of other saints.

Hebrews 3:13 encourage one another daily ... so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

The implication of that is that if we fail to encourage, then we will be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. Praise God for church discipline – that is our security! I praise God for passages like this and Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 and Galatians 6:1, because the passages on church discipline and restoration give me comfort to know that if I start to wander, you all won't just let me go without a fight.

Save

Some people want to correct James here and say, "No James, it's the Holy Spirit who turns someone's heart. It's Christ alone who can save a soul – we can't save anyone." Do you have the power to save someone's soul? Didn't James make a point to tell us in chapter 4 verse 12 that there is only one who is able to save and destroy, and that is God alone? Yes, God alone can save a soul, but when He does that, He uses means. And the means He uses in this case is you. When God picks you to be the tool He uses to save someone's soul, then Scripture actually uses the language that you saved that soul. Not in the ultimate sense, but in a very real sense it is accurate to say you saved that person's soul from death.

Cover a Multitude of Sins

You will save the person's soul, **and cover over a multitude of sins**. As soon as you leave the path of righteousness sins start to become multitudinous.

"I already blew it, might as well keep going."

"If I'm doing that sin, I might as well do this sin – what's the difference?"

As soon as you start picking and choosing what you are going to obey in God's Word, the floodgates of sin are going to break open. You start doing whatever is right in your own eyes and you are going to write another chapter in the book of Judges. And if the person never repents, that multitude of sins won't be covered, and he will suffer God's wrath for those sins in hell for eternity.

That is the negative side, but here James is talking about the positive side. He is saying, if you just go and turn that sinner from his error, then that multitude of sins will be covered. That is another way of saying they will be forgiven (Ro.4:7, Ps. 85:2). James is not trying to emphasize the extent of their evil; he is emphasizing the extent of the forgiveness. Every bit of it will be forgiven if they just repent.

Don't ever hesitate to try to reclaim someone just because of how deeply they have fallen into sin. No matter how overwhelming is the multitude of their sins, they can still be restored. And if you think you have gone too far – sinned too much to be forgiven, think again. Repent, and it will all be covered by the sacrifice Jesus Christ made for you on the cross.

The Importance of Saving Lives

In our culture we give honor to firemen, and policemen, and war heroes. Why? Because saving someone's life is a big deal. And if someone saves your life, that should engender a lifetime of gratitude. Wouldn't you be deeply grateful to that person for the rest of your life? If it is a big deal to save people from physical death, what about saving people from spiritual, eternal death? You might not be physically capable of carrying a baby out of a burning building. You may never have the opportunity to throw yourself on a grenade to save your comrades. But you can do this, and this is far greater. You want to talk about heroism and valor? Give up your comfort to save someone from eternal death.

Conclusion: Restoration!

Let me close with this: what do you do after the person repents? Your job isn't over. In 2 Corinthians Paul is talking to them about someone who wandered from the truth and was disciplined, and then repented. Listen to what he says:

2 Corinthians 2:7 Now instead, you must forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

When the sinner comes back into the church, Satan will do everything he can to destroy that person with shame and guilt. There is no actual guilt now that he has been forgiven, but Satan will do everything he can to keep him from understanding that, so that he becomes overwhelmed by excessive grief over his sin and the painful consequences. When a sinner comes back, did you know it is not enough for us to just forgive him? It is not enough for us to just welcome him back into the fellowship? It is our God given mandate to find a way to comfort him so that he is not overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

Now, here at Agape, this is our wheelhouse. We are a restorative church. If you look at the list of our distinctives as a church, you will see it right there: number 9.

“A man is what he is, not what he was. We do not believe there is any sin that leaves a stain after repentance or that causes automatic, lifetime disqualification from fellowship, ministry, or leadership.”

Joyful, wholehearted restoration is something we take very seriously around here. The prodigal's father did not put him on probation for six months to see if his repentance was really real. He ran to him, threw his arms around him, killed the fatted calf, had a huge party, and rebuked his other son for not being happy. If that is how God responds to a repentant sinner, that is how we should respond.

Culture of Encouragement

Normally we devote the last five or ten minutes of the service to a question-and-answer time, so that people can ask questions about the sermon. But today I am going to do something a little different because this is our final message in the book of James. Next week we'll move on to a new study – Psalm 42. If you know anyone who struggles with depression, please invite them next week. But we are done with James, and some things from this study you will remember; others you will forget. I'm not going to stand up here and try to remind you of every point we've made through the whole book. I pray the Holy Spirit will bring to your mind just what you need right when you need it.

But there is one principle that stands out to me as something especially important for us to remember going forward at this time in the life of this church. Last week I asked you to begin praying and asking God, “Lord, what do you want me to pray for for this church? What great thing do You want to do in this church through my prayers?” As I have prayed that, and as the elders have prayed and wrestled with the question of what is the most important thing for us as a church at this time, we landed on a few things. We have some thoughts about personal discipleship, outreach, orderliness and communication, and servanthood, and we will be talking about that stuff in the future. But for now, the biggest need, and the most pressing thing we want to focus on is this: developing a culture of encouragement. If you remember

one thing from our study of James, let it be all that material in chapters 4 and 5 about being a culture of encouragement.

We could call this The Barnabas Project (Barnabas means “son of encouragement” and if you look at Barnabas in Scripture, he was always encouraging people. He didn’t give up on people – even when everyone else did.). We want to obey James 5:9 and become a grumble-free zone – a culture of encouragement instead of a culture of criticism. We lift one another up instead of tearing down. We are peacemakers sowing in peace, instead of having fights and quarrels. Our goal is that people would walk into this place and be immediately overcome with warm, welcoming, inviting, uplifting love.

I asked Tracy to make us up a banner that we could hang on the wall to remind us of this going forward. Now, if you understand the Greek word for encouragement, you know that sometimes it’s positive but sometimes it is negative. Like we saw today, sometimes we need to encourage a sinner to repent. We are not going to abandon discernment or discipline. And certain situations call for sternness rather than gentleness. But our default now will be gentleness. And our goal will be to always do everything we can to inspire people’s hearts to obey God, and to lift burdens off of people, and to worry more about loving others than being loved. We are commanded to encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that we don’t become hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. And we are to do it all the more as we see the Day of Christ’s return approaching. That means every day that goes by, we step up our encouragement and increase our affirmation.

If you have to correct somebody who is doing something wrong, do everything you can to find a way to do it in a way that encourages their heart instead of discouraging them. If someone is irritating you, maybe it’s because they are also irritated, so try to lift their spirits.

We have actually already made quite a bit of progress in this area. We get all kinds of reports from visitors about how uplifted they were by the kindness and warmth and welcoming love they received when they walked in. Sometimes they say it’s the most welcoming environment they have ever experienced. So we praise God for the progress that is there, but we want more progress, because not everyone has that experience. I don’t know how long this banner will stay up on the wall. But our prayer is that two or three years from now this will be Barnabas Bible Church. (Not that we actually change our name, but we reach a point where there is no doubt that if this church is anything, it is a place of uplifting affirmation and encouragement.)

Benediction: 2 Corinthians 13:11 Finally, brothers, rejoice! Be restored, be encouraged, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

- 1) When you see a brother wander from the truth, what are the biggest hindrances that threaten to keep you from turning him from his error? (Fear of confrontation? Lack of confidence in your ability? Failure to grasp that his eternal soul really is at stake? Something else?)
- 2) Do you have anyone in your life who is likely to catch you early the next time you start to wander?
- 3) Are you that person for someone else?
- 4) If you have a story of how someone turned you back when you wandered, share that with the group.