

Restoring the Wanderer

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. I know it's a little warm out there. I do know that there's some water in the back, and as Greg said earlier, if you need to take a break, just step to one of the doorways.

Unfortunately, it's not any cooler outside than in, but you can at least put down your mask and take a breather if you need it. This morning, we continue in our series in the book of James.

I was thinking about our passage this morning. I was thinking about the fact that wandering is typically not a good thing. When I was young, my family had golden retrievers, and every once in a while, we would leave them out too long, and they would wander. They would wander into the neighbor's yard. They would wander into the woods. They would wander into the garbage cans or the garbage that they would find. They would wander in all sorts of places, and it caused great anxiety. My parents driving, calling the neighbors, looking around the neighborhood, calling. I remember one time one of our dogs came home, and she had this six-inch gash on the side. We have no idea where it came from or how she got it.

Wandering is not always a good thing. Spiritually, wandering is not always a good thing. Probably in the Bible, the most famous wandering is the wandering of the wilderness for the Israelites for 40 years. We have to remember that that was judgment, that that was God's penalty for people who would not trust Him to go into a promised land that He had prepared for them. They were separated from the blessings of God's goodness by their faithlessness, and that was the context in which they were wandering. Similarly, we see in the parable of the prodigal son, the younger son wanders away from the blessings of his father's house, from the provision and the protection and the love that is there. He wants to set out on his own, and he wanders far from home. And the picture that it gives us at the lowest point of his life is one of a Jewish boy working with pigs and eating their food. It's a catastrophe of wandering from God.

You know, as I was thinking about that parable, it struck me that if we were Him, would we have done what He did? Because the parable says He came to His senses and said, I need to go home. I don't know about you, but when we've wandered, when we've wandered from God, when we've wandered from those who love us, when we've wandered from places of blessing, it's often hard to turn around and go back, isn't it? Our pride keeps us away. Our own self-pity will prevent us from turning and returning to the Lord or to those that we love.

[3 : 0 5] Why do we wander? I think there are many reasons, perhaps. Perhaps it's willfulness, rebellion, pride. I want to do my own thing in my own way. I want to be able to be in control, and that means that I'm going to run away from anyone who claims to have a claim on my life or wants to control me. Sometimes we wander out of foolishness. We get caught up in something.

We don't know where it's going. We're not aware. Or we're more concerned about being with the people we're with or going with the flow. And suddenly we find ourselves far away from God, doing things we said we would never do. Sometimes we are led astray. Sometimes there are those who rightfully ask us to trust them because of their position, but then abuse that position and lead us into terrible things.

We are victims, gullible, taken in by those who we've trusted. And sometimes we wander because we are weary. We are weary of how hard it is to keep going with God. We are feeling the pain of our lives, and we run away. We run away from that pain, and often in that running away from our pain, we run away from God as well. And the danger of running away is that the consequences are dire. Biblically, those who wander from God result in death and destruction. Great cost comes to those who wander spiritually. And it is that concern that brings us to our passage in James this morning. The reality of wandering brings James to the conclusion of this letter. We're in James, we're in chapter 5, verses 19 and 20. And if you remember, as we've been preaching throughout, James' heart, his pastoral heart in preaching or in teaching this book and giving it to the church is that the church would be encouraged to be steadfast in faith in the midst of various trials. To persevere in faith, not only in assenting about what is true, but being transformed by the truth of the gospel so that we're living out in consistency the gospel that we profess in all sorts of different ways. Who's given us all sorts of exhortations and commands. How do we deal with the tongue? How do we deal with class distinctions? How do we deal with professions of faith without works? How do we deal with conflicts? And so on and so forth.

He's given us all these instructions about how it is that we live out a steadfast faith. And at the very end, he comes back and he says, to continue in steadfast faith is not just an individual but a corporate thing. And so what we need to do is to come alongside one another.

It is an encouragement about going after those who have wandered away from the Lord to restore them and bring them back to steadfastness and faith so that we might continue on in the gospel that God has given us.

[6 : 25] That brings us to our passage today, James chapter 5 verses 19 and 20. If you want to read that with me together, let's look at it and then we'll pray.

My brothers and sisters, 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. We pray with me. Lord, we thank you this morning for this text.

We thank you for, Lord, the pastoral heart of the Apostle James as he writes these things. God, we pray that you would apply this to our heart this morning.

We pray that you would help us to hear the truth of this word and that we would live it out. God, we pray for those in our community who are wandering from you, that you would turn them back and that you would use us to do so. We pray that we would know with humility, Lord, that we too have wandered far from you and you have been gracious to bring us back.

God, be with us in all these things. Be with us this morning. Will you help me as I proclaim your word to do so clearly? We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

[7 : 59] The heart of what James is saying is this. The Christian community ought to be characterized by the gracious restoring of fellow Christians who are losing their way of steadfast faith.

This is what the Christian community is meant to be, and this is what James is encouraging us to be. So we're going to look at this text. We're just going to walk through three basic steps. What does the text mean? How do we apply it? And how is it rooted in the gospel?

So that's our outline this morning. If you're wanting an outline, the meaning, the application, and then rooting it in the gospel. So that's what we're going to do. So first, let's look at the meaning of this. And basically, it's very simple. There's a condition and then an outcome. Verse 19 is the condition. It says, if, right? And this if is not a, look, maybe this will happen, and if it does, by perchance, maybe. It's not that kind of if. It's actually a when. It's a when this happens, in the occasion that this happens, is what it's saying. When someone wanders from the Lord, wanders from the truth, specifically is what he says. And remember, what James has been telling us about truth for five chapters is that truth is not just a cognitive ascent of a certain certain tenets of faith. It's not just a verbal profession of faith, but that true holding to the truth will change us and transform us, and it will result in actions that are consistent with the gospel and consistent with the God who has saved us. And so wandering from the truth is both a matter of when, if we deny things that are true about God that he has revealed in his word, or when we deny the power of that truth by not living out that truth in consistent ways, these are the things that he's talking about when he talks about wandering. And he says, if anyone has wandered from the truth, and someone brings him back, and this is the great exhortation in the heart of it, is this is what we, James is saying, we want to see this happen. We want to see people who are wandering brought back, brought back in the same way. Jesus uses his same word to pray for Peter during the Last Supper. If you remember,

Peter makes these grand professions, and then Jesus tells him, you're going to deny me. He says, but Satan has asked that you would be sifted. I have prayed for you that your faith might not fail. And afterwards, because it does fail, right? He does fail in the moment, but then afterwards, when you have returned, strengthen your brethren. And that's the very, that when you have returned is the same idea here as being restored. And it's a great picture of what's being talked about.

When we wander by failing to live out steadfast faith, we are to restore one another and to bring one another back so that we can continue to live out what God has called us to live out. So that's the condition or the context. This is the, when this happens, right? And then this verse 20 gives us the outcome.

[11 : 19] Let him know that he will be saved from death and his sins will be covered. That's the core of what verse 20 says. And let him know, who is the him? Well, there's actually quite a lot of discussion in the commentaries about it. It's meant to be an encouragement to the one who goes to restore a brother or sister to say, hey, there's a good outcome. But I think that the weight of it actually is a little bit more on the one who is restored.

Know that as you return from your wandering, the outcome will be good. You will be delivered from death and your sins will be covered. Why does he talk about these things? Well, delivered from death because the God of the Bible is the God of life. And when we are going towards the God of the Bible, we are going towards the life that he offers that comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And when we are going away from him, we are going away from life and towards death. This is what it means when the Bible says the wages of sin is death. We are removed from God, the source of life. And when we do that ultimately and fully, we sit under his judgment and separate from him. And as we do that, then we experience death. And so the restoring of one wandered is keeping people from getting to that ultimate end. So it's not only that being saved from death, but then it's also our sins are covered. And this is such a sweet and rich Old Testament imagery. This comes from the temple where the sacrifices of the temple, the blood of the animals would be spread over the people, would be sprinkled on the altar, would be pressed on people's foreheads at times as a sign, as a symbol, that their sins are covered over by the death of another, that the substitutionary death of one covers over the penalty that another deserves.

This is the picture. And this is why we see in Psalm 32 that we read earlier, blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven and whose sin is covered.

This is the idea. And how do we know ultimately that this happens? This is what Jesus has done for us. His work for us. He has lived the perfect life that we ought to have lived. And then he died the death that we deserve for our sin. So that by offering himself up in our place, both in his perfect obedience and in his sacrificial death in our place, his substitutionary death in our place, he is then able to cover over our sins. And for all who have put their faith in Jesus Christ, what this means is that when we approach God and God the Father looks at us, what he sees is not our wandering, faithless hearts, not our stumbling, rebellious, weak faith, but he sees Jesus' obedience and perfection and beauty.

[14 : 30] And that's where we stand before God because Jesus covers us. It's like he gives us a robe of righteousness that was not our own, that we're able to wear. And it actually is ours. It's not just a cover-up, but it's actually ours in our standing before God. What a beautiful thing it is that Jesus has done this. Friends, as we see this, let's notice the role of community. It would be very easy to read the book of James and to think there are lots of individualistic commands. You should do better here.

You should be stronger here. You should change how you behave here. But here James is saying that the community is essential to steadfastness and to keeping us from wandering in the truth.

And it's wonderful. If you look at the pronouns in this section, the pronouns have two different... One of the ways that the pronouns help us is because it says, look, this isn't just for particular people. This is not just for the elders. James knows how to distinguish the elders. He did so just a few verses ago when he talked about prayer. But here he says, if anyone, if someone, whoever... He's talking about any person in the family of God.

So this is for all of us to be active in seeking to restore a wandering brother or sister. And look, we need to acknowledge this is really countercultural. We live in a world today of tolerance and of privacy, particularly about religious things and personal things.

It's so hard sometimes to go to someone because we hear the voice of the culture saying, what are you doing messing with my business? Get out of my personal life. This isn't about you.

[16 : 31] Who died and made you king? It's very easy for there to be a... There's a cultural defense against this kind of restoration that we need to acknowledge. But James says that actually this pursuing and restoring is a part of a healthy, loving community. And its goal is never to condemn, but always to restore. This is the other thing that the vague pronouns help us to see. The anyone reminds us that I might be in this position of restoring a brother or sister today. I might be a wanderer tomorrow who needs to be restored. And therefore, we recognize this is not separating out the righteous and the stumbling into two different categories in our church. But we need to recognize that it's for all of us. And so, when we are engaged with this, we do this with humility, not with pride. With love, not self-righteousness. With mercy, and not judgment. Because the outcome of this process is good.

Do you remember the story in 2 Samuel 11 and 12? David, the king of Israel, the high point, he's at the high point of his kingdom and his kingship, and he blows it. He wanders far from God's plan and path for him. He sees a woman who's not his own wife. She's the wife of another. He goes and takes her any ways. He then tries to cover it up by killing her husband. It's a terrible story. And at the end of chapter 11, it says, what David did displeased the Lord. And then in chapter 12, God sends the prophet Nathan to talk to David. And Nathan is shrewd. He knows that maybe a head-on confrontation might not be the wisest way. So, he tells a parable. He tells a parable about rich men and poor men and sheep. And I won't tell all the details. But it's basically about abuse of power. About how someone in a position of power is taking advantage of other people. And David gets it. And he hears that. And he says, that's terrible. Nobody should do that. And Nathan looks at him and says, you are that man.

And God turns. God is at work in this. And David is turned. And David is restored.

By this loving, but pretty direct, confrontation. This is what Psalm 32 bears the fruit of. Psalm 32 is a psalm of David after his sin with Bathsheba. It is his exaltation.

Blessed is the one. Blessed is the one. How happy we are when we see how badly we have fallen. And then know that God has forgiven us. And our transgressions are forgiven. And our sins are covered by God's mercy and grace. This is the hope. This is the goodness that James is exhorting his church to be a part of what God wants to do to restore those who are wandering.

[20 : 01] So how do we do this? If that's the meaning of the text, how do we apply it? How do we live this out? So the question is, how do we come alongside someone who has wandered? Someone who is denying core beliefs of the faith verbally? Someone who is living in a way that is inconsistent with the biblical picture of godliness? I think Galatians 6, 1 and 2 give us a good starting point for that.

Galatians 6, 1 says this, Brothers and sisters, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

I'm not going to exegete that passage, but I think that the apostle Paul here captures the heart of what I think James is exhorting the congregation to do. James, as you've seen, isn't always good on the details, like how to live these things out. He just kind of says, this is where you need to go. And so here, Paul is saying, yeah, here's a little bit more. And so I want to give you some pastoral reflections on what does it look like to actually do this. I want to talk about the heart, and I want to talk about the actions of restoring, both for someone who is seeking to restore a brother and for someone who's wandering and who needs to be restored.

So let's walk through this in the next few minutes. The heart of one seeking to restore a brother and sister needs to begin with checking our own motives. If our desire is to make ourselves look good, if our desire is to uphold the truth no matter what, if our desire is to exalt ourselves rather than seeking to lovingly restore, then we ought not to do it until our hearts are different. The goal is always restoration, not condemnation. And it requires humility, not a judgmental spirit. Recognize that James has told us this. There's actually a sense in which this verse is, these two verses are the very end of a section that begins in chapter 4, verse 11. Let me just read that verse to you. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law. And he goes on at the end and he asks, who are you to judge your brother? Now, to put that passage together with this one, I encourage you to go back to our website and listen to the sermon if you weren't here a couple weeks ago, because there's a lot of things to think through in terms of discernment and what's the difference between discernment and judgment.

But fundamentally, one of the things is that God is ultimately the judge and we are not. And in the act of restoring, we are not meant to take that role of judgment, but we are meant to, we are called to take the role of coming alongside and helping turn someone back from wandering.

[23 : 21] A few other thoughts about the heart of one seeking to restore others. Don't make assumptions. Don't assume that you know everything about the context and the situation. Recognize that you don't know the reality of someone's heart and you don't know what you haven't seen. You probably know what you've seen and heard and that's fair, but you may not understand it clearly. So recognize and have humility that you may not be seeing things properly. That this person who may look like they're wandering may not be wandering nearly as much as you think that they are.

Another point in the heart is to avoid self-righteousness, to recognize there but for the grace of God would I be. As we sing in the hymn, prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.

This is true for all of us. And finally, be patient with one another. Recognize that turning may take time. Sometimes straight-up confrontation like we saw with Nathan and David is a necessary part of it.

Sometimes it just is a bit of coming alongside and redirecting. Some of you are parents, you know this. Sometimes you just need to tell your kid no and lay down the law, but sometimes you just come alongside and say, hey, let's not play with the dynamite. Let's come over here and build sandcastles instead. Isn't that a better thing? So be patient and recognize how the process works.

So if that's what the heart is, then how do we lovingly engage? What does it actually look like? First of all, it means to explore by asking questions before we make statements.

[25 : 14] How are you doing? I noticed this happened. Can you tell me more about that? You said this the other day in our conversation. I wanted to follow up and ask more about what you were thinking and what you meant by that. Follow up with clarifying questions once they give an answer.

Can you tell me more about this? I'm not sure I understand what you mean by this. Help me to see this the way you see it.

Express concern. Hey, I want to have this conversation with you because I care about you. Not because I want to fix you or make this right, but because I want it to be, I care about you and your heart and your walk with the Lord.

At its core, at times, almost always at some point, we need to say what you are saying or what you are doing seems inconsistent with what the Bible says. We need to make sure we don't confront people or think they're wandering because they disagree with us on politics or school decisions or, you know, whether your toilet paper rolls this way or that way or whatever it is, right?

Big or small. It's very easy for us to think that because someone disagrees with us about many things that they're wandering from the Lord. We need to make sure that we're doing this on the basis of biblical truth.

[26 : 41] And when we ask this question or when we say what you have said or what you have done seems inconsistent with what the Lord is calling us to, give them time. Give them time to digest and think some people will need a few minutes. Some people may need a few days. Don't expect an immediate response because it often is the wrong response. We'll get to that in a minute.

Ask them, how can I help you? How can I pray? What can I do to come alongside of you? And say, I'm here for you. Even if their initial response is poor. Even if their initial response is dismissive. Say, I'm here for you. I care about you.

So if that's what it looks like from the heart of the restorer, what does it look like from the heart of the wanderer? Well, here's the thing. If you're wandering, your heart is in a bad place. That's pretty certain. If you're wandering, it's possible you're wandering and you don't know it and someone coming is just correcting you and that's helpful. But a lot of times our heart is not in a good place and that's why we're wandering. So in order to think about this, the best thing I can say is to prepare for a time when we may be wandering is to practice when we are not wandering some good, basic Christian practices of community, dependence, and accountability. So the best way to prepare for times when we might be wandering is that when you're not wandering, do these things. One, develop an attitude of dependence. First Corinthians 12 says we are all part of a body and we need one another.

Do we really believe that? Or do we think like I do far too often? Nah, I can do this. I got it. I got it. I can do this on my own. That's not the way God's designed us.

So we need to recognize that this fundamental attitude that we need to cultivate is that of, I need others in my life to follow God. And particularly, what does this look like? I need others to be praying for me and with me. I need accountability in my areas of weakness or in the places where I feel the most pressure from the outside of my circumstances or internally the places where I know I am prone to wander. I need people to hold me accountable and ask me, how are you doing in these things? And we need to be, as Greg preached on last week in James 5.16, we need to be confessing our sins to one another. If we're doing this, our heart is prepared for the time when we wander and someone comes and says, hey brother, sister, it looks like you're wandering. Be like, oh, you're right.

[29 : 37] I am. Again, huh. That's terrible. That prepares us to receive well the restoration initiative. What does it look like for us to receive that when someone comes to us and has the conversation?

First of all, this is the most important, fight the urge to be defensive. It is always our response. And it comes to us honestly all the way back in the Garden of Eden when they rejected God, did their own thing. And God comes and says, what have you done? And they said, they did it.

It wasn't me. It was them. And we do the same thing. It's not my fault. The devil made me do it. My circumstances made me do it. We are so easy. I didn't do it at all.

I don't know what you're talking about. We're so easy to deflect and to deny in our defensive nature. We need to fight the urge for that to be true. And instead, we need to listen.

And we need to ask clarifying questions. I don't understand what you're saying. Or, okay, I'm hearing you, but can you tell me more about what you've seen that makes you think that? What did you hear me say? What have you seen me do?

[30 : 50] Those can be painful questions, but they're really important. And then take your time, because recognize that your heart will probably not respond well in the moment. Maybe it will. I hope it will. But it might not.

And so it's okay to say, look, this is really important, and I see that you are coming to me in love, and I am struggling to respond well right now. Can I just take some time and let's revisit this?

Or can I take five minutes right now and just take a deep breath and pray before we engage in more conversation about this? We need to ask then the Lord to show us what is true.

As someone comes alongside of us and says, hey, I think you're wandering, we want to say, Lord, if that's true, show me. Help me to know it. A lot of times we do know it already in our hearts. But sometimes we don't.

I've been blessed by brothers and sisters who've come to me and pointed out things that I was not aware I was doing, that were not godly. Ask the Lord to show us.

[31 : 59] And then have the humility to receive it, even when it's not well done. Here's what I want to say. If only 10% of what that brother or sister is saying is true, and the rest of it is misunderstanding and character assassination and misconstrual, if 10% of it is true, sift out the rest, cling to that, receive it, and be thankful to the Lord for this brother or sister who had the courage to come and talk to you.

And be thankful to them for their love for you in doing this. And then ask them for help. This is, again, what James 5.16 tells us to do.

We need to ask one another to pray for us, that we might be healed of our sin. This is an important piece of community life together. Ask for prayer.

Ask for counsel. Ask for accountability. Ask someone to walk with you as you try to turn. And sometimes these patterns are longstanding, and they're not going to suddenly go away. And it's going to take time to turn that ship around.

Ask them to walk with you through that. And finally, for both the restorer and the wanderer, fundamentally we need to recognize that this is ultimately God's work, not ours.

[33 : 26] We need to trust that the Holy Spirit is at work. And if we are the restorer, we need to recognize we are not the conscience of someone else, and we are not the Holy Spirit called to convict them of sin.

That is God's job, not ours. We are meant to come and to lovingly present what we've seen and heard, and to let God be at work in them. You cannot convict another person of sin or change their hearts.

And don't try. Because it's taking God's place and God's role. And for the wanderer, recognize that if someone comes to you, even if this feels like it's complete craziness and it's a complete fabrication, have the humility to say, God, are you trying to say something to me?

Even if what they're saying is wrong, God, are you trying to say something to me? Have the humility before God and ask God to convict you of your sin and to show you where you may be a wanderer.

Friends, what James is saying is that a community that does this thrives. Some people have said that the church is a place where we shoot our wounded. James says, no, it's the opposite.

[34 : 50] We go and bring them back. We go after the lost sheep and we bring them back. We come alongside and we bear one another's burdens and we encourage one another and we exhort one another and we restore one another.

This is what real love is, not just niceness. A church that loves one another enough to go after those who are wandering and to bring them back.

So this brings us to questions for our own hearts. Brothers, sisters, are you wandering from God today? Are you denying His sovereign goodness and His love in your life?

Are you running from Him in pain or in anger or in rebellion or in pride? Are you harboring a sin that you don't want to give up? Is there something that you are hiding from God and from your church family that you need to bring into the light?

If you are wandering, send up the flare gun. Let someone know that you need help. Find someone who you can trust.

[36 : 05] And it doesn't have to be the pastors. We would love for you to come talk to us. But it doesn't have to be us. That's what James has said. This is a community project.

The other question we need to ask is, are you concerned about a brother or sister today?

Have you heard them deny the truth of the gospel, the character of God and the work of Christ? Have you seen sinful patterns in them justified and perpetuated?

And are you shrinking back in fear from pursuing them to come alongside and restore them? See, friends, in all of this, we need to remember the gospel that we profess.

The gospel that tells us that we have a Savior who has done this for us. Jesus who came to seek and save the lost. And that's not the lost out there.

[37 : 08] That's me and you. He came to seek us, to rescue us from our lostness. He came to bring us life when we were dead in our sins and trespasses.

He came to seek us, not because we were seeking Him, but when we were His enemies. Jesus, whose life and death cover our sin and whose resurrection brings life to us.

He who is our good shepherd, who goes after the lost sheep. And in whose kingdom there is more rejoicing over one lost sheep who returns than 99 who stay.

This is the good news of the gospel. This is what we have believed from the very start. And this is the heart from which James can give us his exhortation to be a community of people who love one another the way Christ has loved us.

We are only able to restore others because Christ has come and restored us.

[38 : 17] Let's pray. Lord, thank you for this word. And thank you for the ways that it speaks to us.

God, I pray for our hearts, Lord. That you would make us right before you this morning in thinking about these things. Give us as a church, I pray, a love for one another that would have the courage to go and bring others back.

God, give us the humility to admit when we are wandering and need help. And Lord, would you do that so that you might build us up as a church of steadfastness and faith for your glory.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.