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Saving a Soul from Death James 5:19-20 Part One

We have finished our examination of James 5:13-18. I have presented to you over a number of weeks what I personally believe is the best interpretation of this controversial passage. Though I have presented to you what I believe is the best interpretation of this passage, I would not want you to believe that this is the official position of our church. Remember what I told you. This is a very controversial passage. Agreement is difficult to come by.

Now we have come to the last two verses of this epistle. Let us take our Bibles and read **James 5:19,20** “**My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, (20) let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.**”

Is there any direct link between **James 5:13-18** and **James 5:19-20**? And the answer appears to be no. The phrase “**My brethren**” marks a sharp break in the flow of thought. First of all there is no connecting participle that indicates a close formal connection. And secondly, by placing the phrase “**My brothers**” first in the Greek text, James appears to very decisively be separating James 5:13-18 from James 5:19-20 in the same way he separated James 1:19-27 from James 2:1-13. It therefore seems more natural to assume that vv. 19-20 are not directly connected to James 5:13-18 and is intended as a short but very effective conclusion to this epistle.

And certainly James 5:19-20 forms a fitting conclusion to James. This epistle in a very real sense has an evangelistic emphasis, but it is an emphasis that primarily is directed at professing believers in the church. James wrote this epistle to call professing believers to examine their faith and to make sure it was real. He was deeply concerned that no one be deceived about his salvation. That concern originated with Christ in **Matt. 7:21-23** “**Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. (22) Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in your name, perform many miracles?’ (23) ‘And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’**”

Echoing the words of Jesus, James called for true, genuine saving faith. It is a frightening and tragic reality that throughout history there have always been tares among the wheat; rocky, shallow, thorny soils that produce no spiritual fruit. In the Old Testament there were those who drew near to God with their words while their hearts were far from Him according to **Is.29:13**. In the Old Testament there were those for whom God was “near with their lips, but far from their mind” according to **Jer. 12:2**. In the New Testament, in fact in this epistle, James speaks of those who are hearers of the Word, but not doers, in **James 1:22**.

To help people avoid being deceived, James has given a series of tests by which one’s faith can be evaluated.

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True saving faith is marked by a proper response to trials which we called the “Response to Trials test” in James 1:2-18.

True saving faith is marked by a proper response to the word of God which we called the “Response to the Word test” in James 1:19-27.

True saving faith is marked by a proper response to people of various social classes which we called the “Impartiality test” in James 2:1-13.

True saving faith is marked by it’s manifestation in righteous deeds which we called the “Works test” in James 2:14-26

True saving faith is marked by righteous speaking which we called the “Speech test” in James 3:1-12.

True saving faith is marked by wisdom from above which we called the “Wisdom test” in James 3:13-18.

True saving faith is marked by not being a friend of the world which we called the “Friendship with the World test” which extends from James 4:1 - 5:12.

This friendship is shown to manifest itself in four different ways in this particular section. Friendship with the world reveals itself in selfish strife in James 4:1-12, in an attitude of presumptuous self-sufficiency in business planning in James 4:13-17, in wrong reactions to experiences of injustice in James 5:1-11 and in self-serving oaths in James 5:12.

And finally, true saving faith is marked by prayer, which we have considered in James 5:13-18.

Why did James write this epistle? James wrote this epistle to call professing believers to examine their faith and to make sure it was real. Hopefully after this examination had taken place, the vast majority of his readers would have had their faith confirmed. Hopefully the vast majority of the professions of his readers actually matched their lifestyle. But what about those few readers who did not have their faith confirmed? What about those few readers whose profession of faith did not match their lifestyle? Could these wandering professing believers be restored? And the answer is yes! And this should be an encouragement to us.

You may have a son or daughter who is a professing believer but whose life is lacking any evidence of genuine saving faith. They may be professing with their lips that they are a Christian but the way they are living their lives does not support what they are saying. Is there any hope that they can ever be turned around? I think that from this passage we would have to say that there is. It might be that you have a mother or father who is a professing believer but whose life is lacking any evidence of genuine saving faith. They may be professing with their lips that they are a Christian but the way they are living their lives does not support what they are saying. Is there any hope that they can ever be turned around? I think that from this passage we would have to say that there is.

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James 5:19-20 introduces his readers to a hypothetical but very likely scenario with very positive results. Though these verses do not command his readers to take any specific action, the hypothetical scenario that James presents his readers will hopefully compel them to take action.

My hope in studying these two verses is that when we are finished we will be much more involved in the lives of professing believers who are spiritually struggling and who are not behaving like Christians. My hope is that through these efforts these people who are in grave spiritual danger will be saved and as a result of this that our church will be purified. What do we learn from **James 5:19-20**? First of all we learn that “caring Christians can be instrumental in restoring straying brothers.”

CARING CHRISTIANS CAN BE INSTRUMENTAL IN RESTORING STRAYING BROTHERS

It is not enough for us to simply be assured after an examination of this passage that we are okay. It is not enough for us after looking at this passage to know that our faith is genuine. What about other professing brothers and sisters in Christ who appear to be failing these tests of genuine saving faith? What about them? Can they be helped? And the answer is yes. It appears that it is possible.

Let us read **James 5:19**, “**My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one (what?) turns him back.....**” Professing believers who seem to be failing these tests of saving or living faith should not be ignored. These individuals can be turned back.

There are some Christians who only want to work with other professing believers who are faithful. And certainly the Scriptures encourage us to work with faithful men. What does **2 Tim. 2:2** tell us, “**And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.**” But just because we are commanded to work with faithful men does not mean that we can ignore those professing believers who are unfaithful. We still have a responsibility toward them. In other words, our ministry cannot be to the exclusion of either the faithful or the unfaithful. God desires us to have a ministry in the lives of all men. The focus of 2 Tim. 2 was on the ministry to professing believers who have proved themselves faithful. The focus of James 5:19-20 is on the ministry to professing believers who have shown themselves to be unfaithful.

Who is responsible for this ministry to the unfaithful? Obviously it would have to be a faithful man or woman who would do this. Those who have examined their lives in light of the truths of this epistle and found their faith to be genuine, who have found their faith to be living, who have found their faith to be saving, that’s who. This is why James is sharing this hypothetical but likely scenario at the beginning of V. 19. And James affectionately calls these believers who have passed the various tests of living faith in the Epistle of James, “My brethren.”

The professing brother or sister in Christ who has failed these tests would be comparable to the man that James describes as having strayed from the truth. They may have at one time appeared as if they had in fact possessed saving or living faith but they have strayed from the truth.

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Now when you hear this phrase, “**if any among you strays from the truth**” you might immediately think of truth in a doctrinal sense. You might immediately think of someone who has strayed away from orthodoxy and certainly there are many examples in the Scriptures of people doing this. But I don’t believe that this is the emphasis in this particular passage.

Truth in Jewish thought is not just something to believe in but a way to go, and certainly this is very prominent in Jewish thought (Ps. 25:4-5; 26:3). Listen to **Ps. 25:4-5 “Make me know Thy ways, O Lord; Teach me Thy paths. (5) Lead me in Thy truth and teach me, For Thou art the God of my salvation; For Thee I wait all the day.”** To the Jews to embrace God’s truth was to embrace God’s path. Listen to **Ps. 26:3 “For Thy loving kindness is before my eyes, and I have walked in Thy truth.”** Trying to embrace truth without that truth ordering our steps and dictating our walk to the Jewish mind was silly. And certainly James who was a Jew, writing to Jews, made this very clear in his epistle. What did James tell us? Faith without works is dead. We need to walk the talk. Those who are no longer walking the talk have strayed from the truth (Ps. 25:4-5; 26:3; James 2:17). How did this happen?

Straying from the “truth” suggests the familiar metaphor of a sheep wandering astray (Ezek. 34:4; Matt. 18:12; 1 Pet. 2:25). Although gregarious by nature, a sheep nibbling the grass among the rocks and crags could easily become lost. And unfortunately the same is true with professing believers. They may start out well enough enjoying the camaraderie and fellowship of the saints but they begin to nibble on a lie of Satan, a morsel of the flesh, or an inducement of the world and find themselves cut off from righteous living as defined by James within the tests of this epistle and ultimately could be described as having strayed from the truth. They are no longer walking the talk. They begin to look at other nice people, or not so nice people in the world. And this is extremely serious and has serious implications.

James is saying to us either we are walking according to truth or we are not walking according to truth. Either our life looks like a disciple of Christ or our life does not look like a disciple of Christ. For James the basis for evaluating spiritual health of a professing believer is not open to discussion. He has given very objective and concrete tests of living faith and we need to take them seriously. This concept forcefully thrusts the church today into confrontation with the world. Surveys indicate that two-thirds of American adults believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth (this percentage is 74 percent among people 18-25 years old). The assumptions of relativism which are in this world tug at the professing church daily and threatens to influence the professing church. The tests that James presents to us in this epistle are our absolute. These tests do not vary with the individual, time or circumstances, and God will hold us accountable in respect to these tests.

Those within our fellowship who seem to be failing these tests of saving or living faith should not be ignored, they have strayed from the truth. These individuals can be turned back. By who? By those who have examined their lives in light of the truths of this epistle and found their faith to be genuine, who have found their faith to be living, who have found their faith to be saving, that’s who.

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But how? How can those who are straying from the truth, who are not living a life consistent with their profession, be turned? Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul in **2 Cor. 10:3-4** **“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, (4) for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.”** What are these weapons?

I am not talking about armor, I am talking about weapons. What are our weapons when we enter into battle for the souls of men and women?

The first weapon to turn a so-called brother who has strayed from the truth is the Word of God. You are, I am sure, familiar with **Eph. 6:10-17**. Let me read for you this passage. **“Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. (11) Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. (12) For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. (13) Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. (14) Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, (15) and having shod your feet with the preparation of the Gospel of peace (16) in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. (17) And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”** Obviously if we are going to enter into a battle for the souls of men, all of these defensive armaments need to be in place but what is the offensive weapon that must be wielded? The sword of the Spirit which is the word of God must be used by the one who seeks to turn a professing believer who has strayed from the truth.

The word of God is alive and powerful, we are not. If we truly want to be effective in turning a straying so-called brother or sister in Christ back to the truth we must be willing to minister the Word of God to their lives. I know that this may be difficult but it is the weapon that the Lord has given us for the destruction of fortresses. You may have a parent or a child who has strayed away, but don't give up, they still may be turned back but we must know the weapons that are available to us.

The second weapon to turn a so-called brother who has strayed from the truth is prayer. Let us go back to **Eph. 6** but this time let us read **V. 18**, **“With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.”** I know that prayer is not specifically identified as a weapon in this passage but there is certainly no way that the sword of the Spirit can be wielded effectively apart from prayer. These two activities must be done in conjunction with one another.

CONCLUSION

My brethren CARING CHRISTIANS CAN AND SHOULD BE STRIVING TO BE INSTRUMENTAL IN RESTORING WANDERING SO-CALLED BROTHERS WHO HAVE STRAYED FROM THE TRUTH DON'T GIVE UP..... DON'T BECOME INDIFFERENT

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..... THE STAKES ARE TOO HIGH WHICH WE WILL SEE NEXT WEEK AND YOU MUST BELIEVE THAT YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.