

MBC – 3/13/2022 – Pastor Doug Thompson

JAMES: TESTS OF A LIVING FAITH

***“Bring Back the Wandering”***

James 5:19-20

This morning we finish our study of James. We spent two weeks just getting a running start on these last two verses, and let’s turn there together—

- James 5:19–20 <sup>19</sup>My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, <sup>20</sup>let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

James doesn’t end by greeting friends in the churches. He doesn’t end with a benediction. He ends by exhorting believers to follow Jesus and go out and seek and save the lost. Bring back that wandering sheep. (Pray)

***Intro - Search and Rescue.***

I want to begin this morning by putting this passage in the larger context of all of Scripture. The entire Bible is the story of a great search and rescue mission by God, spanning all of human history, *to bring back to Himself His people, His sheep, who have wandered away from Him.*

- It began in the Garden when the first two people God created, the entire population of the earth at that time, turned from Him and hid themselves from their Creator. And what was God’s response?

*“Adam, where are you?”*

Then in the fullness of time, God sent His Son from heaven to earth – *to seek and to save that which was lost.* He told that triad of parables in Lk.15, about seeking a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son to illustrate God’s heart toward *His own children.* Jesus was on a mission from God to rescue them and bring them home by dying for them. And everyone He *rescued*, He *recruited* to be on His *“search and rescue team”*—

- Matt 4:18 While walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.

How did they follow Jesus? They became fishers of men, because that’s what Jesus was. And this was a decisive break with their old life and a new calling on their remaining days. Twice, when Peter tried to go back to fishing for *fish*, Jesus wouldn’t let him. He was a new man with a new calling. But I don’t read anywhere in the Gospels that Jesus says to *any* person, “Come to Me to get your sins forgiven – then you can just go back to what you were doing.”

And then at the very end of Matthew’s Gospel, before He returns to the Father, He goes global with this fishing expedition—

- Mat 28:19 Go [in My power, and with My authority] therefore and make *disciples* of all nations,

What is He saying? “Go into every corner of the world, and keep fishing for men!”

- baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to *observe* – do – obey – all that I have commanded you.

And what did Jesus *just* command them to do? To go fishing – for men – to make more fishermen, who will keep repeating the process until this commission is complete—

- Mat 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

So Jesus begins His ministry by saying, “Following Me means signing on to be a fisher of men.” He ends His ministry by saying, “Now go *global* with this thing, and I’ll be back when you’re finished.”

Beloved, this is what it *means* to be a Christian: if Jesus rescued you from the hell your sins deserve, He calls you to go out and rescue others. If Jesus saved you, it’s *why* He saved you. This is who we are. It’s why we exist. He said to His Disciples:

- Joh 20:21 “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

*Sometimes I think we missed the memo—*

\*Now if you would step back and look at all the stuff that churches here in the U.S. do, you would think Jesus said, “As the Father has sent Me, go therefore and have pot-lucks, and Bible studies, and sponsor AA meetings, and have a thrift shop, and do sports ministries, and oh yes, support a few missionaries.” But Jesus said—

- Mat 12:30 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

You gather, or you scatter. God forbid that Jesus would ever look at this church and say that we are scattering because we aren’t with Him in gathering.

- A few years ago Janice and I were in Tulsa, Oklahoma visiting Rachel when she was teaching at a Christian school. We visited her church. It was a small, poor church. Their facilities were nothing like ours, but that church lived and breathed for outreach into the projects nearby. Everything they did was aimed in that direction. As we sat there listening to the pastor preach, there were almost 2 dozen college interns there for the summer to work with the black kids from the projects, and every intern had a kid or two next to him or her, squirming and crawling under the seats, making paper airplanes out of the bulletins, while the interns listened to the sermon like they were getting a war-time briefing from the general before going back to the front-lines to fight!

And I thought, “That’s exactly the way we should all listen to a sermon!” But we will only do that when we are on the front lines, cutting the barbed wire to get across enemy lines to rescue the spiritual

prisoners of war who are held captive by Satan to do his will. That puts the urgency in our Bible study and prayer life. And if we can't go ourselves, we are praying for those who do: and wrapping bandages, sending blood. To switch analogies, we hold the rope for those who go down into the well: like the Christophers in South Africa, the Williams in India, like our own Ashlee Trener in Cameroon.

- I absolutely believe that our health as a church depends upon this – because it's what Jesus called us to do! Not just to keep taking in without giving out. To whom much is given, much is required – didn't Jesus say that? Someone said that no one has a right to hear the Gospel twice as long as there are those who haven't heard it once.

I want MBC to be a church of fishermen, and fisherwomen. I want us to relate literally everything we do to the Great Commission. We are who we are. We will never be a mega-church; but we don't need to be a stagnant, ingrown, little pond either. If we aren't reaching outside these walls with the Gospel, then we don't justify our existence. I believe John Piper nailed it when he said, "We go, we help to send others, or we disobey." And I speak for Rudi and Erroll when I say that by God's grace, MBC will be a going church and a sending church, but we are not going to be a disobedient church.

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Now against that backdrop, let's look again at our final two verses in James' letter. And I want you to hear these words as spoken to you, personally, by the Lord Jesus—

- James 5:19–20 <sup>19</sup>My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, <sup>20</sup>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.

First let's see—

### I. Who are the wanderers?

We spent two weeks laying the foundation for understanding this passage: It's not talking about a Christian who loses his or her salvation, and then is brought back to salvation. That doesn't happen. Ever. Salvation can never be lost. Eternal life is eternal.

- *But* this person is part of the church. Look at v.19, James says, "My brothers (*adelphoi* – Christian brothers and sisters), if anyone *among you* wanders from the truth" James isn't talking about going after a lost person *outside* the church. We do that too, but here he's talking about going after someone who has been a regular part of the church, everyone knows them, they always bring a dish for the church potluck, they teach children's church, or maybe they sing on the worship team. But then they begin missing a Sunday here and there (and isn't that a danger sign when we are commanded not to forsake our assembling together?) Maybe you hear rumors that something isn't right, or their FB posts are just off.

What does James mean here by "wandering?" The Gk. word is interesting, it's *plane\_s*, it's where we get our word for *planet*, because in ancient times, the planets seemed to wander in the sky. So this person who has been a part of the church family *has* "wandered from the truth." And that can mean two things. It can mean—

#### 1.) *Wandering away from God's truth.*

What Scripture calls “sound doctrine.” Maybe you can think of someone you used to sit next to you in this church, hearing the same sermons as you – but they wandered away from the truth – maybe they were led astray by some false TV or YouTube preacher, or they were seduced by some cult—I have known people who were part of MBC who left to join up with the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Mormons, or went back to Roman Catholicism.

- Years ago a gal from our church packed up her family and moved up to Yelm, Washington to follow J. Z. Knight, who claimed to channel a 35,000-year-old spirit, named "Ramtha."
- I know a solid church in SR where one of the elders began teaching *annihilationism*, that no one suffers for eternity in hell – that’s just too horrible – instead, after a time of punishment, they just cease to exist. That’s what the JW’s and 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists also believe. If you remember the sermon I did on hell at the end of last year, that is *wandering from the truth*.

When God saves a person, that person will believe the truth of God’s Word. Scripture talks much about “The faith” –faith as a noun, that *body of truth* that believers will believe—

- Jude 3 says we must “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”
- Ephesians 4:5 says that the church has one Lord, *one faith*, one baptism.
- Ephesians 4:13 Paul says that we are to grow as a body <sup>13</sup>until we all attain to the unity of *the faith*.

*The faith*. Don’t you think that Paul knew what he meant by “*the faith*,” and his readers understood what he meant by “the faith?” Yes, and they knew where to find it, in the Scriptures that have been “*once for all delivered to the saints!*”

If someone wanders from the objective standard of truth that God has given us in this Book, go out and bring them back to “the truth!” A person who continues to reject *the Truth* – will be lost unless they repent come back.

\*I honestly get tired of hearing how much error we can believe and still be saved: “Oh, now Pastor Doug, don’t judge other churches – like the Adventists. They are such good people.” Yes, many of them are, but their church teaches false doctrine – really nutty stuff: e.g., we have the mark of the beast and are going to hell because we worship on Sunday, and they believe the writings of their plagiarizing false prophet, Ellen G. White – oh, but they are still Christians!” Well, maybe by the grace of God some of them are, but I still say to them: “Repent! You have no right to believe what is false!”

\*In our SS we have been comparing what the Scriptures say about justification by faith alone with what Roman Catholicism teaches, and we keep asking the question, “Well, are they saved if they don’t believe what the Bible teaches? And again, maybe in spite of what their church teaches, they are saved, but I still say, “Repent! Stop believing what is false!” Stop worshiping Mary and praying to the saints and re-sacrificing Jesus in the Mass. It’s wrong. God has revealed the truth, and the faith, for His people, so get it right.

- Honestly, I believe that many people sitting in churches, perhaps some in this church, believe that as long as you are sincere and you really love whatever Jesus you have invented in your mind – and you are a good person – you are on your way to heaven. And many of these people will hear Jesus say, “Depart from Me, I never knew you!”

Beloved, it’s a serious thing to be wrong about God’s Word! It is a sin to be wrong about God’s Word, no matter how sincere you are. It’s a good thing we have a forgiving God, amen? But we still “*must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it*” (Heb.2.1) If someone is drifting from the truth, go get them, bring them back.

But wandering from the truth can also mean--

## **2.) Wandering away from walking in the truth.**

You can *profess* the truth, you can *proclaim* the truth, but if you don’t *live* the truth, you don’t really believe it—

- 1 John 1:6 <sup>6</sup>If we *say* we have fellowship with him while we *walk* in darkness, we *lie* and do not practice the truth. Because—
- 1 John 2:6 <sup>6</sup>whoever *says* he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

John was echoing James who said, “It’s not what comes from your lips, but what comes from your life that shows what you believe.” If you want to know what Pastor Doug really believes, don’t listen to my sermons, look at my life. What I live is what I believe. And Jesus said the same thing—

- Matthew 7:21 <sup>21</sup>“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who *does* the will of my Father who is in heaven—
- Luke 6:46 <sup>46</sup>“Why do you *call* me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not *do* what I tell you?”

Lips can lie, lives tell the real story. James says we are to go after that person who is walking in disobedience, hiding his sins in the darkness, regardless of what he professes. His soul is in danger. Go after him.

- Why is it that Christians so often give the benefit of the doubt to a person’s *words* when their *walk* contradicts their words? I just read a story about a man who worked with children in a mega-church. Led a children’s choir. On the outside he was a model Christian. Behind the scenes he was emotionally and physically abusing his wife and kids. And I mean serious abuse. His wife went to the church elders but they didn’t believe her – “Oh, not this good man, you just need to submit.” She finally went to the police to get a restraining order, and moved out to protect her kids. The church demanded that she forgive him and take him back. She was the one in sin. She refused, so they disciplined *her* – named her and shamed her from the pulpit. People from the church began writing her notes, harassing her, telling her she was in sin and she needed to restore her marriage.

Finally she discovered that her husband had sexually abused his own children. He’s spending the rest of his life in prison. But the church never apologized to her. Never admitted that they were

wrong. I just heard that he came up for parole and he was denied by the judge who called him “a sadistic predator who weaponized religion.” His church called him a model Christian.

Beloved, Jesus said “Be wise as serpents!” Lips can lie, but lives don’t. It’s no virtue to be naïve: “If you know that He (Jesus) is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him” (1 John 2:29). When the walk doesn’t match their words, you go after that person because they have wandered from the truth and their soul is in danger.

## II. What are the possible outcomes?

Now look at it again—

- James 5:19–20 <sup>19</sup>My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth – whether in belief or in behavior – and someone brings him back (the Gk. word here, *epistrepho*, it means to *convert*), <sup>20</sup>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.

1.) So the first and best outcome is that the wanderer comes back to the fold and is truly converted. Truly saved. And that means that they *were* – truly lost – despite all appearances to the contrary. I have known people who taught Sunday School, led the choir, even pastored churches, and would have sworn that they were saved, but then they were born again. Surprise! And the angels in heaven rejoiced. And we should rejoice too when that happens.

2.) There is another outcome, and that is that the person rejects your love and concern, and they never come back. We have to be prepared for that, don’t we? And honestly, this is the most common outcome, because when a person has sat under the teaching of God’s Word, and then left the truth – it is hard for that person to turn back. They’ve already heard the Gospel, and hardened their heart against it. What more do you have to say to them that they haven’t heard?

Turn with me to a very serious, very sobering passage that describes *some* – not all – but *some* of the wanderers James was talking about—

- Hebrews 6:4–6 <sup>4</sup>For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift (that could refer to the Lord’s Table, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, <sup>5</sup>and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, (they have witnessed mighty miracles) <sup>6</sup>and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

These are people who seemed so close, but were so far. They rejected the truth after full exposure to the light. We call such people, “apostates.” And by the way, I think this is the unforgivable sin that Jesus talked about. “Full rejection of the truth after full exposure to the light.”

What a warning for Christians, who can’t fall away, not to fall away. (and if that sounds like a contradiction, you have to listen to last week’s sermon.) It makes me shudder to think about what these people will face when they appear before God. John said—

- 1 John 2:19 <sup>19</sup>They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

3.) But there is another happy outcome that James doesn't deal with here: that wanderer might be a true Christian who wandered away, and because a brother or sister loved them enough to go after them, they come back to the fold. They might have lapses, but because they have eternal life, they will never fully nor finally fall away, but will certainly persevere in the faith. And we said last week: it is through warnings, and rebukes, and sometimes even the discipline of the church, that God's children will always persevere. Listen—

- Hebrews 3:12–14 <sup>12</sup>Take care, *brothers*, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. <sup>13</sup>*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. <sup>14</sup>For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

So let me wrap up this point: Let's say you become aware of a person in the church who is beginning to stray in their beliefs, or in their behavior. They have left the straight and narrow path and they have somehow wandered onto the wide road that leads to certain destruction. Do you have to try and figure out if they are a self-deceived unbeliever, or a believer who has just temporarily drifted? No! It doesn't matter. Just go after them, right? Go.

### III. Who goes?

Do you notice James doesn't say, "If someone among you wanders from the truth – let someone call for the elders. . .," like he did a few verses earlier? Isn't it the elders' job to go after the wandering sheep, after all, they are called *poimen* – shepherds. Yes, it's their job, and it's your job too—

- "If someone among you wanders, and someone, (he means, any individual in the church), brings him back. . ." Who should go? You. And me. "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yes! And so are you. Beloved, we are a body, when one part starts to malfunction, the entire body goes into action—

We are a family, we care for one another. One of the greatest weaknesses in a church is when the members assume that *search and rescue* is only the job of the the pastor and the elders. It *is* their job – shepherds are to care for their sheep! But it is also the job of each and every member. Look with me—

- Ephesians 4:11–12 <sup>11</sup>And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the *shepherds and teachers*, (to do what? What is our primary ministry to the body?) <sup>12</sup>to equip the *saints* for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

The shepherds of the church train up the rest of the church to do all that needs to be done to build up the body of Christ – including "search and rescue!" That's when the church grows—

- Ephesians 4:15–16 . . . the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

- Someone recently came to me concerned about one of the sheep – I’m so glad they did – and they asked if someone might reach out to this person – that is a great thing to ask of your pastor. But my response was, “I will follow up – which I did, but because you have a personal relationship with this person, you are probably going to have more success than me, and they agreed.”

Isn’t this just the Golden Rule? If you begin to slip, don’t you want another brother or sister to come after you? Don’t you want someone to love you enough to pull you back?

- I read the testimony of a man who was a Christian, but he got into sin and lost his bearings, left the church – and he said it just like he was out at sea, in deep water, deep trouble, drowning. All his Christian friends were on the shoreline hurling Bible verses at him about sin and consequences and God’s judgment. He said: “There was one man who swam out to get me and he wouldn’t let me go. I fought him . . . [but] he pushed aside my fighting and he grabbed me and he put a life jacket around me and he took me to shore. And by the grace of God, he, was the reason I was restored. He would not let me go.”
- “Whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

When you do that you are doing God’s work—

. . . Someone asked me one day after church if we have a “lost and found.” I said, “Just look around!”