

XXVI. James in Biblical Perspective
The Gospel Life According to James
“True Religion and Best Practices, Part III”

James 5:19-20

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This is our last and 26th study of the book of James and we'll be in James 5 as we conclude our series in this book. This is a concluding section on best practices of a Gospel wisdom church. This is the Word of God. It's the truth. James 5:13-20 says *[13] Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. [14] Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. [15] And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. [16] Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. [17] Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. [18] Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.*

[19] My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, [20] let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of our God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may it be preached for you.

Very likely this was the first New Testament book written, approximately 14 years after the ascension of Jesus and approximately 14 years before the martyrdom of the writer of this book, the half-brother of Jesus, who was converted after the resurrection of Jesus. It is a book on Gospel wisdom. It sums up the wisdom books of the Old Testament in Christ who is our wisdom and the Gospel life of wisdom. It has a very clear theme to it that we have shared and you can understand why this is important. They have been under persecution. Stephen has been killed. Apostles have been under persecution at Jerusalem. So James writes to them in James 1:2-4 which says *[2] Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, [3] for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. [4] And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

He tells them what they need in this broken world is wisdom. In other words, the theme of James is the Gospel life is a life of persistent ministry and joyful maturation in a sin-cursed world informed by the God-sent gift of wisdom from above. So James is telling us we have a Gospel foundation where we have been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. We have a Gospel motivation which is the love of Christ. We have a Gospel life we want to live for Christ and to do it in a broken world you need wisdom. The trials expose the wisdom you have, expose the wisdom you need and uncover any strongholds of idolatry in your life so that kill that in your heart and grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ our Lord.

How do you get that wisdom? You pray for it, go to God's Word for it and God gives it generously to you. What does that do? That gives you a life of true religion, not

false religion which is a man-made religion thinking we can earn a relationship with God but true religion is based upon the grace of God, not a religion that works our way to God but a religion that is based on God coming down to do the work for us to save us from our sins and now given us a life in Christ and a life to live for Christ which is true religion. True religion is living a sacred life for the Savior who has saved you. Then James begins to deal with all kinds of issues like money, relationships, prejudices and your language. He deals with the bridled tongue. He says true religion is marked by a bridled tongue, the pursuit of holiness, ministering to those in need and then he exposes our external sins.

As we leave this epistle, James has done something very important so don't miss this. As James exposes our external sins he makes clear that those are only symptoms. They aren't the problem. Remember? The heart of the problem is the problem with the heart. The mouth is speaking from the heart. The life is being lived from the heart. Over a year ago when I went to the doctor he told me my PSA was up and that could mean prostate cancer so we were going to have to go to work on this. Then he told me he was going to put me under an MRI. He used the external symptom to find out where the problems were. As I was laying there I thought, "He'll not only find out why that PSA is up but he'll find out a lot more of what is in there. I wonder what else he'll find in there." That is what James has done. He will expose the external sin and then under a Gospel MRI he'll show you that the problem is coming from the heart.

Get this. Sin and salvation are inside jobs. In a mystery or a crime drama you see a detective come in and say "this was an inside job." When we speak ungodly language or be oppressive or disobey God's Word, it's an inside job. It's not an external job for it's happening in the heart. Salvation is also an inside job. He gives you a new record, a new heart, a new mind and you live it from the inside out. That's what God does and that's what James has done here. He says here is the problem for it's the problem with the heart and with a Gospel MRI, a transformed heart, a transformed mind and with Gospel wisdom we begin to push out the sin and put on righteousness for Jesus Christ because of the work of grace He has done for us, in us and through us.

So we get to the end of his book and he decides to conclude it with some best practices and he gives us four issues. These four issues will be found in every Christian's life. The first one he covers is suffering. If anyone among you is suffering then let him pray. The second is cheerfulness. If anyone among you is cheerful let him sing praises. The third is sickness. If anyone among you is sick let them call for the elders of the church and let them pray over them with the prayer of faith and anointing them with oil. By the way, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another as well. The fourth issue he covers is anyone among you who is wandering from the truth. So these are the four issues he concludes his book with.

Some of you reading this are suffering for Christ in this broken world under adversity or persecution or mocking. I'm not talking about the suffering that comes from sin but from those who have been faithful for Christ and you're suffering for it. It is where you took your stand for Christ and you're suffering for that. You are to pray and that is your first step. James gives us what the first response should be in these issues. So your first response in this issue is to pray so you get Gospel wisdom on how to deal with this. It is not the last thing. Prayer is not the least but it's the best. It's not the last, but it's the first. It's not the only thing you do but it's the first thing you do. James 1:5

says [5] *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.*

Secondly, you have seasons of cheerfulness. Adversity is a way of life. When you have seasons of cheerfulness you praise the Lord so that you don't start worshipping the blessings that brought you cheer. You worship not the gift but the Giver. You make sure you stay focused on the Lord and not upon the blessings when you have cheerfulness in your life.

Thirdly, what if you're sick? You call for the elders of the church who are ready to pray for you and anoint you with oil. By the way, in a Gospel wisdom church you not only have elders who are accessible to work with you but you have an entire congregation. We pray for one another. We confess our sins to one another and it goes throughout the entire congregation itself.

So James gives these first responses and best practices to these situations that we all will face in our life and that are right here. There are people here who are suffering, sick and need people to pray for them and there are people here who are cheerful. There are also people here today that are wandering or are going to wander or starting to wander, so what do we do? This is how James concludes his book. I will tell you that if you won't pray for people who are sick then you won't do this but if you'll pray for those who are sick then it's to build in your life that you'll do this. So let's walk through these two concluding verses in the book of James.

He is speaking to those who profess faith in Christ in the family of God. James 5:19a says [19a] *My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth...* This immediately tells you a couple of things. Number one is that God's Word is true. This is the Word of Truth whereby we are born again as we see in James 1. Truth is not subjective but it's objective. God's Word is true. Is there someone wandering from the truth? This also tells you that among God's people they are capable of wandering.

I'm going to give you two groups of people among God's people that can and sometimes do wander but before I do I want to give you the Greek word for wander and that is *planeo*, where we actually get the word planet from this word. In the primitive days of astronomy as they would look into the skies they would map all these stars with unbelievable precision but there were some lights that were just a little different and kind of showed up at different places. They called them wandering stars – *planeo*. They eventually find out they are planets and realize how to track them but not them for then they just saw them as wandering stars but that's the word used here. So James is saying that among us are those who are wandering, you see them moving away, in other places and you get concerned about them, at least I hope you do. They are wandering from the truth and who are they?

The first group of people that can wander are true believers. They do wander and have wandered. I have wandered in my Christian life and thankfully God has brought me back which brings me to the full definition of this. True believers can and do wander away from the truth but if they are true believers God will bring them back, by the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of the Gospel, to Himself, but God does that work (of the Spirit and power of the Gospel) through preaching, teaching and His people. God does that through means. You as God's people are part of the means. When a brother wanders God will bring them back through brothers and sisters who go after them, through the power of the Holy Spirit and the Gospel, through people.

The second group of people who wander are among God's people on this side of eternity are false believers. They are professors of faith but not possessors of faith. They not only can wander but they will wander. It is just like Simon the magician. He was excited about this faith and was baptized but Peter said his heart was still in the bondage of iniquity. So there have been examples throughout the Bible of those who have joined among God's people. Here is what John says in I John 2:19, *[19] 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.* They have apostatized. They have walked away from the truth because they were not really of the truth.

Here is the difference. The true believer will wander but will be brought back. The false believer will wander but not come back but will oppose the truth and be in despair and depression because of their wandering. There are two examples of this in the Bible. Jesus had His "church" of the twelve. Did Jesus' disciples have any wandering problems? Yes, look at the week when He went to the cross. They all left Him. Two stand out the most of the disciples who left Him. Who are they? It is Peter and Judas, but Peter comes back. Judas betrays and dies in despair. Judas does not come back. There are two examples. Peter, a true believer, will even wander again for in the book of Galatians and Paul will bring him back. Peter wanders and is brought back. Judas wanders, opposes, betrays and dies in despair by his own hand. So those are the 'anyones' that are referred to in this verse.

Now who are the 'someones' that are referred to in this verse? James 5:19b says *[19b] and someone brings him back...* So among us there will be 'anyone' that will wander and then there will be the 'someone' who intentionally, relationally and Gospel powered will go after them. You can't bring them back if you don't go after them. You go after them to bring them back home. It assumes that elders, pastors, and shepherds will be doing this for they are ready responders and last responders but the first responders are brothers and sisters in Christ. In your family who knows it first when things begin to go wrong? The brothers and sisters are the ones that start seeing the wandering first. Where are they in small group? Where are they in congregational community? Where are they in worship? They are not coming. All of a sudden it just starts happening.

Brothers and sisters would note it and out of concern for Christ and for the one wandering they intentionally and relationally pursue them with a design to restore them back to the truth from which they are wandering, back to the people of God and back to being a Christ follower instead of a sin wanderer. They bring them back home. That's what they do. I understand this. When my dad and mom were still living there wasn't a day went by that I didn't talk to someone in my family. Now it's mainly my sisters and my children. We'll talk about things that are happening and day doesn't go by that someone isn't talking with someone. We are aware of each other and if someone is going wrong we pursue one another.

If you pursue them and bring them back home what happens? James 5:20 says *[20] let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.* He says when you bring them back two things have occurred. Number one is that you have saved his soul from death. Whose soul is being saved from death? Is it the 'someone' who went after the one who

wandered or is it the ‘anyone’ who wandered away from the truth? Grammatically in the Greek it could be either one and there is maybe a sense that it is both.

When Paul speaks of his ministry to the Ephesians in Acts 20 he says ‘I was with you publically and went with you house to house.’ In other words, he went after them and was with them as a shepherd publically and house to house weeping over them. Then he says in Acts 20:26-27, [26] *Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, [27] for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.* He is not saying that because you went after them you earned your salvation but it manifested that you had life and not death and you’re an instrument of life to them. Yet I think the bigger thing is it is saying that you’re saving their soul from death for when they come home it has just manifested that they weren’t false believers that would have been headed to eternal death but it manifested the marks of a true believer who has been saved from death unto life and you were his instrument who accomplished that. He did it but He did it through you.

Secondly, it says that you have covered a multitude of sins. This doesn’t mean we cover up sins. On the contrary it means we’re dealing with, confessing and owning sins. There are two meanings for the word cover here. Number one is that it means you have gone to them to bring them home by taking to them the Gospel which is the message that Jesus will forgive all of their sins. He will cover them because He eradicates them with His blood and He will then cloth you with His righteousness. It’s like when the prodigal son came home for he was cleaned up and a robe of righteousness was put on him. When you come home you are declared cleansed from your multitude of sins and you are clothed with His righteousness which now covers you and makes you right. Notice this. It’s usually not just one sin that has propelled the wanderer but it’s usually a multitude of sins that have converged and Jesus can handle all of our sins and He will cover us.

Covering has another meaning here for when you’re ministering to them, while we confront sin, we don’t unnecessarily expose people publically. That doesn’t mean we cover up sin but it also means after we have brought someone home we don’t stand up on Sunday and tell everyone God used you to do that in their life. You don’t make that a badge of public honor for you but you bring them back relationally and minimize all that you can while you maximize God’s grace that covers them and restores them. So that looks at the carefulness and relational way that brings them back home.

In a situation like this I wished I could say to James “James couldn’t you just be a little more precise?” because when I’m reading this I want James to know that we don’t bring them back but God brings them back. James would say that he has been saying that God brings them back but what James wants us to know is that when God brings them back by the Holy Spirit with the power of the Gospel, He uses people and that’s what he is talking about. He is not saying that we’re the savior but that we’re the instrument through which Christ is working as the Savior.

When God brings them back and God saves them then why James did you say ‘we’ cover them? It is because we don’t expose them and we point them to the Gospel blessings that all of their sins are covered, the multitude of them and that’s what James is trying to say to us here. So let me give you my last takeaway from the study of the book of James.

The takeaway is churches and Christians who are saturated with Gospel wisdom from above, act like family, as brothers and sisters pursue one another with love (fruit of the Holy Spirit) and truth (the power of the Gospel). Christ not only has the power to forgive you and cover you but He has the power to change you so that instead of a wanderer He will make you a follower. That's what God has called brothers and sisters to do. We will go to some who are false believers but they won't come back but those who know Christ will eventually come back. They will come back from the precipice and be enfolded back into the family, back among God's people.

Here's the problem. What James just told us to do is not our natural response. Our natural response when a brother or sister wanders is to avoid them, withdraw from them or we'll deny that it's happening. Those are our natural responses to this situation. Sometimes we'll degrade into a sinful response. When someone wanders we gossip about them or slander them or in self-righteous arrogance we look down on them. So we want to say 'no' to the natural response and we certainly want to crucify and say 'no' to the sinful response.

What is our Gospel response? What has God called us to do and what has He instructed us to do? We expect the elders to be available to respond and they are last responders but by the time elders get involved in this kind of thing, humpty dumpty has done fell off the wall and you can't put him back together again, very seldom. I've seen victories and praise the Lord for that. Most victories come when brothers and sisters proactively, intentionally, relationally, begin to see humpty dumpty get on the wall teetering and go to them. That is where the greatest success happens. It is when the family acts like family and brothers and sisters move toward them

I'm deeply indebted to Dr. Ferguson for his language on this when he talked about the Good Samaritan. In the story of the Good Samaritan found in the Gospel of Luke the Levite walks by and just looks at the man beaten up by the road side. The priest walks by and just looks at him. Then this is what Dr. Ferguson says about the Good Samaritan, "You can just hear the Levite saying 'oh my goodness someone ought to do something about this' and then the priest comes by and says 'oh my goodness someone ought to do something about this' and the good Samaritan walked by and said 'I ought to do something about this.'" You hear others saying "why don't the elders do something about this." I'm going to be very direct here. I love you but you do something about it. Not only is this the first response but you are the best first responder.

That is why the Bible says to you in Romans 15:14, *[14] I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.* That's why the Bible says in Galatians 6:1 *[1] Brothers, 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.* Restore those who are ensnared and approach them with gentleness, reverence and humility. That's why Jesus lays out in Matthew 18 that if your brother sins then go to him and win him. If you falter go get one or two other brothers and sisters who can go with you. If you falter then, then we'll go to the last responders, the elders but you start. That's why He tells you that you're capable of doing it Romans 15 and how to do in Galatians 6 and He gives direction and a roadmap in Matthew 18.

In Luke 15 He says here is one sheep who is wandering. What do you do? Go after the wandering sheep. The prodigal son is in a far country in a pig's trough. He

comes to his senses and comes home. What does the father do? He welcomes him with the fatted calf, the robe of righteousness and the signet ring. That is why He is telling us those things for this can and will happen. Now if 'anyone' does this, will I be a 'someone' who goes after them to bring them home?

So why do people wander? I think people wander for multiple reasons. The unbeliever who is a false believer will wander because he doesn't have a root in his heart and eventually he just has to get out from under it, will oppose it, and become discouraged and depressed throughout his life. The believer will wander because of various reasons. Following Christ has numerous reasons but the number one motivation to follow Christ is the love of Jesus but as I was listening to Derek Thomas the other day he said he had cataloged fifty reasons to follow Jesus as a Christian. He acknowledged and I'll acknowledge that some are more virtuous than others but there are multiple motivations to follow Jesus and obey Him. There are multiple reasons and influences why people begin to wander.

That is why I believe the Bible records so many of them. For instance, Paul says in II Timothy 2:17b, 18a [17b] *Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, [18] who have swerved from the truth...* Paul says they began to wander away and it was because they were careless and so it is for us. We get careless about the preaching and priority of God's Word, the priority of fellowship, the priority of the Lord's Supper and all of sudden we get careless about the small group where we're accountable, being nurtured and disciplined and even careless about the Lord's Day. That's why it says in Hebrews 10:25, [25] *do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.* The whole book of Hebrews is warning you, 'don't wander away.' Then He tells you not to be careless about the means of grace and the people of God.

Sometimes it is like Demas or Alexander in II Timothy 2 who both opposed Paul. II Timothy 2:10, 14-15 says, [10] *For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. [14] Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. [15] Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.* Sometimes people wander because they don't want the truth of God's Word and they begin to wander away from it or it becomes hard. One preacher said that Demas wandered away because he had an affair for he loved this present world and it became more important to him than Jesus did.

What about Elijah? In his self-reliance and his all-about-me thinking, he began to be discouraged and wandered away. The Lord said "Elijah you're not the only guy in town that is being faithful. There are many more." What about Peter? Why did Peter deny the Lord? He was afraid of a servant girl, a soldier and a bystander. Later on Paul had to confront Peter because he had wandered away from the Gospel because Peter had been intimidated by those who had come down from Jerusalem. Those are some reasons why we wander. There are a variety of reasons we wander from the Gospel.

If you say you're going to be a Godly, Gospel-saturated brother or sister and you see someone wander here is what you do. There are five things you can do. Number one is you pray for them through intercessory prayer. Number two, go to them with compassion, humility and gentleness. We are not the Gospel Nazi sin police. Number three, go to them with the courage to confront, in compassion, humility and gentleness

looking to yourself first. Number four, bring relentlessly the Gospel power and promises where Jesus can forgive you and bring you home. The Gospel has the power to make the wanderer a follower of Christ. The Gospel is their hope. Number five, walk with them relationally back home and into the family. Go with a personal commitment to reconcile them back to the family, back home.

Pastor, where did you get those five things? Intercessory prayer, humility, compassion, gentleness, courage to confront, relentlessly keeping the Gospel blessings, promises and power in front of them, the unstoppable commitment to bring them back to full reconciliation and restoration, all came from what happened when Peter wandered away and how he was brought back through Jesus and Paul. Jesus told Peter He would pray for him and that's the difference between Judas and Peter. Notice the gentleness when Jesus said to Peter, "Peter do you love Me more than these?" when He was restoring him. Notice the courage to confront him when Jesus said "Peter, you're going to deny Me three times." Notice the hope of the Gospel when He says "But when you return..." Then watch as Jesus restores Peter as He cooks him a breakfast at the shore of the Sea of Galilee and ask him three questions that bring in back personally into the family of God and the company of the faithful. Those are the steps we take as the Lord leads us to bring someone back who has wandered from the faith.

Now you see why this is so challenging and overwhelming but it's also so exciting because when one sheep wanders you go after the sheep, right? When one sheep wanders from the flock who do you expect to go after the one sheep? It is the shepherd and James knows that. Yet here is something special about God's flock – it is sheep go after sheep. Sheep become shepherds of other sheep.

Then we have all heard all the sermons on the prodigal son and how the father welcomed him but the elder brother in his arrogant, self-righteousness looked down on him. In the prodigal son the problem isn't just what the elder brother did as in his arrogance and self-righteousness he didn't welcome the prodigal son back home, but it's what he didn't do. The elder brother should have gone to the far country, the pig trough to bring his brother home. That is what he should have done and you have a brother like that. It is your Elder Brother and His name is Jesus. He went to the far country and it's called Calvary, to bring you home.

So we as brothers and sisters follow our Savior to bring people home. You are not so good that you don't need to hear that Gospel. If you think you are then you're in big trouble and you are not so bad and sinful that, that Gospel can't bring you home. You are also not so far that you can't come home. Your Savior through His people by His Spirit with the power of the Gospel is calling you, come home. If you are home, you know people that aren't where they ought to be and they are starting to wander. Don't say 'somebody ought to do something about this.' You be the instrument of the Holy Spirit and the Gospel to bring them home to Jesus, back in the family. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. Thank You Father for it's wonderful challenge and excitement and the adventure of being brothers and sisters that go after one another of saying 'no' to our avoidance, denial and withdrawal as people begin to wander and certainly say 'no' to gossip, slander and self-righteous arrogance but then to engage to pray for them and go to them with gentleness,

compassion and humility. We are to go willing to be courageously confrontational for this is sin and it will kill you so come home and to bring the Gospel message that they know all of their sins are covered and the wanderer by the power of the Gospel can be made a follower. Then walk with them back into the family so that they are home. Father, thank You for this Gospel life that James has laid before us. Thank You that it's not somebody else that ought to do it but You have called us, empowered us and gifted us and we ought to do for You will do it through us. Come home for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.