

Saving Souls

James 5:19-20

You might look for a personal ending to the book of James, but you don't really find it here. There are no personal greetings, no final conclusions summarizing all that he has written. No real concluding benediction or best wishes are expressed.

But there is a great encouragement here, especially for teachers, a subject he introduced at the beginning of chapter 3, the second half of this book. The first half of the book essentially dealt with the appropriate conduct in the lives of Christians that was necessary to give evidence and proof of the existence of God's saving work. Faith without works is dead, James proclaimed so clearly.

Then beginning with the exhortation, "Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment." But with that warning, he comes back to end with the encouragement of a great reward. The reward for those who are used by God to save other souls from death. So the subject is saving souls.

Unfortunately, I believe, we don't use that language enough. Perhaps it is because we know and understand the doctrine of God's sovereignty--it is God who saves souls. Now, I know that. And James certainly knew that. James certainly knew that it was the work of Jesus Christ that atoned for our sins, that it was the predestinating love of God which was the moving force in that work of salvation. He would have known what Paul wrote to Titus,

Titus 3: 4 "But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us,

through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

James knew that, and you and I need to know that also. And know it well. But still, what a great encouragement there is written here--when you bring a sinner back to the faith in repentance, you will "save a soul from death." And you "will cover a multitude of sins."

So what does he mean by those words. I'll begin with the obvious,

I. THE NEED FOR RESTORATION.

"If anyone among you wanders from the truth." It happens, doesn't it? The Greek word is the word for being deceived or to go astray. It can refer to both false doctrine as well as the morality of life. There are those among the church who go astray. They are called "sinners" in verse 20. All of us are, of course, still sinners. The remnants of that old nature are still within us, and we won't be free from the presence of sin until the day of our glorification at the judgment seat of Christ.

But James' reference is not simply to sinners, but wandering sinners. Unrepentant sinners. Sinners living in their sin without repentance, without grief and hatred of it. Sinners who are not battling to put their sin to death. That is whom James talks about. It is the same person whom John addresses in,

1 John 3:4 "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. 5 And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. 6 Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him

nor known Him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. 8 He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. 9 Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God. 10 In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.”

John, just like James, identifies,

A. The dangers of wandering from the truth.

Ultimately the conclusion is, if you wander, if you go on sinning, if you “make a practice of sinning” as the ESV puts that verse, you are of the devil. Not a Christian. As James puts it in verse 20, the wandering sinner is subject to death. Spiritual death. The soul’s separation from God.

Now, this is troubling, both personally and theologically. It is troubling to the church to have a fellow member in the church fall into such sin. It is troubling on a personal level, because within the church we treat one another as brothers and sisters. Brothers and sisters in the Lord. The communion of the saints. We accept one another as Christians. And our theology teaches us that those who are true Christians shall never fall away. For example,

John 10:27 “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. 28 And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand.”

But wait a minute. James warns that those who wander from

the truth will die unless they are brought back. So which is it? Can a Christian fall away, or not? Let me answer this way. One who is regenerated, whose heart is changed, cannot be unregenerated. One who is justified, whose sins are removed from them as far as the east is from the west, who are declared to be not guilty on the sole basis of the finished, accomplished work of Jesus Christ, such a one will never be unjustified. So from the perspective of God’s eternal decree, “no, a Christian cannot fall away.”

But we don’t see things from God’s perspective. That is to say, we don’t see what he calls his secret will. He has not revealed the full content of his eternal decree, nor has he told us who elect are. We only see the outward evidence. And from our perspective, those who profess to be Christians do sometimes fall away. And this warning is a very real warning. So again to quote John, I can answer clearly,

1 John 3:4 “Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, 5 but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.”

And then continuing,

1 John 2:19 “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 they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.”

So there are those from the church who “go out from us.” And not merely by transfer, but by apostasy. By wandering from the truth, in life or in doctrine. And occasionally even the Session is called upon to pronounce judgment upon such people, as the Scripture requires,

1 Cor. 5:12 “For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But

those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person.””

And even more blunt is the warning of,

Heb. 6:4 “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.”

Thus, with the expression of those biblical dangers, what we are called to do is,

B. The call to repentance.

“Turn him back.” The word means to convert, to bring about a change. Those who are living in sin need to be brought back. They need to be converted, or returned to Christ. They need to be brought to repentance. Without that turning, there will be death.

But how does such a turning take place? Well, God has to do it. You can’t turn anyone back. You can’t change anyone’s heart. God does those things. But HOW does God accomplish those things? Through me, as an Elder and minister of the word of God? Yes, certainly. Does he accomplish those things through the formal discipline of the church exercised by the Session. Yes, he does. That’s one of the great purposes of that discipline.

But James is addressing all of you. His appeal is more broadly spoken than merely to teachers and elders. He addresses all of you, “brethren.” And even with that grammatical reference to the male gender, all of you are included. “My brothers and sisters,” it is your duty to be about the work of,

II. SEEKING RESTORATION.

God does the work. But he uses you and me to do it! And so the encouragement to seek restoration from those who are wandering is for us,

A. A personal obligation to one another.

And so this broad warning against falling away clearly implies a mutual obligation that we share among ourselves.

Hebrews 3:12 “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; 13 but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.”

Exhort one another!

Heb. 10:23 “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. 26 For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.”

Again, the grave warning carries with a responsibility within the communion of the saints, that of “encouraging one another...” As Paul puts it,

Gal. 6:1 “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. 2 Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

One commentator puts it this way, with an obvious understatement: “Tactfully reproving a person who is wandering

from the truth is one of the most difficult tasks in the work of the church.” As another commentator writes, the church is to be “a redemptive brotherhood.” Within the body, we bear this responsibility, this personal obligation to one another.

That doesn’t mean that we judge one another, as judges unto condemnation. It doesn’t mean that you demonstrate any sort of spiritual pride, considering yourself to be more important or more advanced than anyone else. It doesn’t give you the right to be harsh, or condescending, nor certainly hypocritical. For remember what Jesus said to the hypocrites,

Mat. 7:1 “Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. 3 And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye?”

Yet that is not how the paragraph ends. Jesus goes on,

Mat. 7:5 “Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

So what is required to do so?

B. A personal confrontation.

Oh, how we hate those! If we just ignore the sinner long enough, the problem will go away. If we just act towards the wandering sinner as if everything is fine, he will turn back on his own. That’s the wisdom of the devil that has been adopted all too often within churches. “If I get involved, it will just get worse.”

Well, maybe it will, so terrible is the influence of sin. But in

God’s good providence, in accordance with his own good purposes, maybe it will get better! Indeed, perhaps God will grant him repentance through through willingness to confront. Paul writes to Timothy,

2 Tim. 2:24 “And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, 25 in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, 26 and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.”

The immediate reference is to the Elders there, but the broad principle applying to you all is the same. Correct the wandering sinners, with gentleness, in the earnest desire for God to “grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.” With great hope, as Jesus says, “If he listens to you, you have won your brother.”

One more word of encouragement in this, and a grammatically precise translation of the Greek would make it clear, that there is great hope for good results.

III. THE RESULTS OF RECONCILIATION.

“Let him know” we read in verse 20. Let the one who is seeking to confront a wandering sinner know “he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.”

“Let him know” might better be translated, “Remember this.” Or, “You must know this...” Someone willing to seek to try to bring back a wandering sinner MUST KNOW that God has promised good results! You must know, if you are to do this, that God has said that this is the means by which he will accomplish his work of salvation. Specifically,

A. Saving a soul from death.

You must know that because if you don't, surely you will never attempt a personal confrontation in the first place! If you aren't convinced that that is the method God uses and blesses, surely you won't ever try it, because it is such a difficult thing to do. So to go about this responsibility, you must know that you will save his soul from death!

Amazing language, isn't it? That God would use you to bring someone back, and save his soul. God would use you to such a great extent that James can write as if you are actually the one saving his soul.

Calvin summarizes this responsibility so well with these words: "We must therefore take heed lest souls perish through our sloth, whose salvation God puts in a manner in our hands. Not that we can bestow salvation on them; but that God by our ministry delivers and saves those who seem otherwise to be nigh destruction."

That's Calvin! "We must therefore take heed lest souls perish through our sloth, whose salvation God puts in a manner in our hands." The clear explanation of that: "God by our ministry delivers and saves those who seem otherwise to be nigh destruction."

We don't use that language enough, do we? Saving souls. We ought to use those words more, and realize the significance of them. And be encouraged by all of this! Be motivated to do this very, very hard work with that encouragement. That if you succeed, if, when you go to your brother who has sinned and he hears you, you have saved his soul from death!

And secondly, go about this work with the confidence of

knowing that you will be,

B. Covering a multitude of sins.

Again, astounding words for James to us. Without comment or explanation. But with obvious reference to,

Prov. 10:12 "Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all sins."

Peter quotes the same proverb,

1 Peter 4:8 "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins."

But what does James mean? And why does he say that the believer covers a multitude of sins? As we studied with the idea of saving a soul from death, it is God who does this work. It is God who covers our sins, in the sense of atoning for them. It is the substitutionary death of Christ that is that atoning sacrifice. It is the blood of Christ that covers our sins. Make no mistake about that.

But according to Proverbs, in relationship to one another, you can forgive sins without any atonement. Love can be the atonement. Love can be the basis upon which you grant forgiveness, and in the closest and most intimate of relationships between good friends and family members, that's what you do with most sins! You don't confront and rebuke. You simply choose to forgive, unilaterally. And that's a good thing.

So this act of confronting a wandering sinner is, as well, an act of love. It is certainly not that, by seeking to bring someone back to Christ, you atone for his sins. Or for your own, and there is some uncertainty even as to which James refers.

It seems to me that he speaks of the covering of sins of the wandering sinner, yet not that the loving Christian who seeks to

save his soul actually covers his sin, but something greater, “something higher [writes Calvin], that is, that sins are blotted out before God; as though he had said, Solomon has declared this as the fruit of love, that it covers sins; but there is no better or more excellent way of covering them than when they are wholly abolished before God. And this is done when the sinner is brought by our admonition to the right way: [Calvin concludes...] we ought then especially and more carefully to attend to this duty.”

You need to know that, you must know it, if you would dare to accept this responsibility in your relationships with one another. You must know that God will, indeed, cover sins. Any sin, provided there is repentance. And when you confront someone about their sin, that would well worth emphasizing. Rather than a judgmental condemnation, speak the truths of the gospel even as you speak the words of rebuke and admonition. Truths such as this,

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Truths such as this,

1 John 2:1 “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”

And this,

Rom. 3:23 “...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith.”

And this,

Ps. 103:10 “He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; 12 As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

Armed with that doctrine, convinced that God can use you in accomplishing his own purposes of salvation, know and be assured of this, that “he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” God be praised for such a glorious work of his own grace.