

SERMON TITLE: A Communal Faith

SCRIPTURE: James 5:19-20

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SERIES SUMMARY

In Scripture, we find the life of faith is often a difficult journey. But true faith in Jesus will show itself in tough times and display the reality of Jesus to a watching world. In the same way, we're called to give voice to our words and action to what we believe. This is how our faith can make a transformative difference in our lives and the lives of others. On this side of eternity, a faith not applied is worthless and will make no difference. The book of James regularly asks us to put our faith into action so others can witness the reality of Jesus in our lives. As we turn towards Christ, our faith journey will be purposeful, fruitful, and sustain us through any difficulty we face.

SERMON SUMMARY

In our cultural context, faith can often be turned into a self-help journey. It regularly gets over-individualized to the point that a lot of people's understanding is now about faith in their own ability to have faith. Self-centered spirituality is rampant and largely unhelpful. But in the Bible, faith is like a group project. We're called to a communal faith, a communal trust in Jesus. The Bible's word for this is covenant. The context of our faith is the covenant people of God. That's the space where our faith is supposed to take root and be challenged and grow. So, we have to ask, what does a communal faith look like? James 5:19-20 helps us think well about this question.

SERMON SCREENSHOTS & KEY POINTS

- A communal faith in familial and vulnerable.

For the 20th and last time, James calls his friends "brothers and sisters." Why? Well, because Jesus is the true Son of God when he welcomes people into God's family because of what he has done, we become Jesus' brothers and sisters. We become family. This was the dominant way that the early church thought about themselves in relation to one another. But healthy families not only know each other's business but leave space for one another to own up to their business. That's vulnerability. It's entrusting your soul to people that you have to believe aren't going anywhere, who also have your highest good in mind, even if it gets messy. It's just what a healthy family does. That's why James just said, "confess your sins one to another." You can't do those things the right way on the surface. It requires an interpersonal depth and an honesty that we often think we don't have time for. It requires a confessing posture that we're often scared of because shame holds us back. But it's also the appropriate shape of a communal faith: familial and vulnerable.

- A communal faith will be distracted and tempted.

Yes, we're Jesus' family, but we're his family in a broken world. The presence and pain of sin are still very real. Knowing this, James starts talking about temptation and perseverance in his opening words of the whole letter. He pleads with them, "Do not be deceived, my brothers and sisters" (1:16). And here, to close, he similarly says, "If anybody wanders from the truth, go get them" (5:19).

The picture here is that we're all on a road together, and then we realize that another brother or sister is off the road. They're off the path. And this is not about whether they're a Christian, but about whether or not they're acting like it (just like the workless faith in James 2 that exists, but it's useless; it's like living in death). And the strange thing is that the same word for "wander" in 5:19 is the same word for "deceive" in 1:16. The word is just about someone off the path, but doesn't tell us *how* or *why* they started going a different way. Maybe they were lied to, deceived, tricked, or abused.

Or maybe they rebelled, hardened their heart, and stuck up their middle finger at God. Whatever the case, this is about a brother or sister whose life is clearly out of step with the faithfulness and self-giving love of the gospel.

Sadly, this is a part of a communal faith in a fallen world. You will feel the ache of people you love who are going and trying to do their own thing. And you may even feel the temptation to quit walking the path because sometimes it can be heavy. But the reason James ends his letter like this is because of how he started his letter. He starts with calls for perseverance and steadfastness. He encourages them right away to endure trials, and count them all joy because they strengthen your faith. He declares, "Blessed is the one who remains steadfast under trial" (1:12). And so, these final verses are an exclamation point at the end of James because they represent anti-perseverance. Here is a picture of un-steadfastness. This wandering is an unanimated faith. And you were not created for the kind of isolation suggested here. But thankfully...

- A communal faith should be restorative and repentant.

When James tells his friends to go bring home the wanderer, he's telling them that, as Jesus' family, they should be a pursuing and renewing and restorative bunch. And here's why it's restorative *and* repentant. Obviously, this includes family members pursuing other family members who need help, but the word for "bring back" is a word about turning. If we go get those who have strayed the path and we turn them around, they still have to walk back. This is a both-and snapshot of walking back with them to where you're supposed to be walking together. Paul Tripp calls this being "intentionally intrusive" in people's lives. And you can't do this outside of godly community. It's also helpful to think of this as "patiently pursuing" other people. But however you define it, the process of 5:19-20 is not quick, and it's not tidy. It mandates a messy with-ness that will most assuredly get in the way of your individual pursuit of happiness. And the goal of this is that our brother or sister would be restored and get back on the path. The final step in this is repentance. Repentance is a U-turn. It means to change your mind. It's realizing that your fist is tightly clenched around your way of doing things, and then slowly loosening your grip on your agenda and your plans to cling to God's plans instead. The restorative movement of faithful believers to be present to, to care for, and to bring back distracted believers is completed with repentance.

- Lastly, a communal faith is like Jesus because of Jesus.

This requires some explanation. If we go after the wanderer, James says we "save their soul from death" (5:20). What does that mean? This is not directly talking about eternal death apart from God. This is talking about living in death now (like the dead faith of James 2). And like the healing and saving earlier in James 5:15, this is likewise talking about a present restorative salvation as a foretaste and reminder of our full eternal salvation in Jesus. James also says that doing this "covers a multitude of sins" (5:20). This is actually deeply pastoral and practical because sin connects to sin. You don't randomly struggle with a sin. The sin of control at work could be connected to a sin of manipulation at home, which could be connected to substance abuse, which is likely connected to unbelief that God is faithful. So, James' point is that, when a brother or sister is brought back, a multitude of interconnected sins start to be seen and repented of. And this is all a small reminder of the eternal forgiveness and salvation we have in Jesus. He's our big brother who forgives perfectly, and he wants us to experience that now in his family.

In this, Jesus is our ultimate example. From Luke 15, Jesus is like the shepherd who leaves the 99 to go after the lost sheep. He's like the woman who ardently seeks and finds her lost coin. He's like the father of the prodigal, pursuing in order to restore. He came after us to save and rescue us, to give us a place in his family forever. So, why should we count it all joy, brothers and sisters, when we face trials of various kinds? Because for the joy set before him endured the cross, the ultimate trial. Why are we blessed if we remain steadfast under the test? Because he stayed the course all the way to Calvary and wore a crown of thorns so that we could wear a crown of life. Why should we be patient in suffering? Because love is patient, and Jesus' long-suffering love towards us can give us grace to endure. Why do we leave the path to go after a wanderer? Because he left his throne in heaven to come after us and bring us back. Why is it messy and self-emptying when we pursue others? Because it was messy when he emptied himself and became flesh and dwelt among us. And we will rightly follow Jesus and live as his family if we are rightly depending on him and not ourselves.

Two practical questions arise here.

- First, do you have anybody like that in your life? Do you have anybody that you know would come after you and lovingly pursue you even when you're not making the best decisions? Who is that in your life? People like that are required if you are going to persevere in faith.
- Secondly, how do you become that person for others? How do you become an empathetic pursuer, in Jesus' name? What is required to have enough relational trust and equity with someone that they're not on the defensive when you go after them?

COMMUNITY GROUP QUESTIONS

- What was your favorite part of this passage/message? Why?
- When is it hardest for you to be vulnerable or repent?
- If you started to wander, do you have anybody (or a group of people) who you believe would graciously "come get you" in Jesus' name?
- How do you become this kind of person for others? How do you become an empathetic pursuer? What is required to have enough relational trust and equity with someone that they're not on the defensive when you go after them?
- When have you most felt the familial nature of the Church, that we all belong to each other as we belong to Jesus?
- In what ways can we retell the gospel story with the language of James 5:19-20?

The following resources have been a great help to us in preparing messages for this sermon series: *The Letter of James (NICNT)*, by Scot McKnight; *James (ZECNT)*, by Craig Blomberg; Mariam J. Kovalishyn; *The Epistle of James*, by Peter Lange & J.J. Van Oosterzee; *The Letter of James*, by Douglas Moo. Also, I (Charlie) have benefited from the teachings of Tim Keller, Andy Stanley, Tim Mackie and the Bible Project, and others whom I will credit during my messages. I have adapted and borrowed insights and illustrations from these men and incorporated them into the messages in this series.