

Practical Christianity; What to do when one Wanders

For the past several weeks, we've taken a journey through the Book of James, I hope it's interesting and helped you grow deeper in your relationship with Jesus. This journey of going through 108 verses – has shown us what God has to say to us concerning the practical and victorious Christian life.

And by the way; a life that is not biblically practical - is not the life of victory and abundance God has planned for you. *James has pointed out how doubting through trials, passing the buck when we've been tempted, gossiping, jealousy, being judgmental, living and planning without God, and taking advantage of others are just a few ways we wander or stray from God.* Today we come to the end of the Book and a final parting piece of truth for someone following Jesus.

One night while I was doing some sermon research – which Beth calls channel surfing... I came across a channel that showed what looked like a beach on the Pacific Ocean. And there was a person caught in an undertow and beginning to drown. As the Lifeguards swam to the swimmer – in his panic he began to fight his rescuers. The lifeguards finally had to overpower and restrain the swimmer, just so they could save his life.

Christian writer Howard Hendrick told about a man who strayed far from God, but was brought back by a loving friend. When the Christian admitted that he had wandered from the Lord and turned back to God, Hendrick asked him how it felt while he was away from God. The gentleman explained, *“That he felt like he was out in deep water, in deep trouble and all he heard from his friends at the shoreline were a bunch of religious accusations about penalty, sin and punishment. But there was when one Christian friend who swam out to him and didn't let go, he put a life jacket around me and took me to shore. By the grace of God, he was the reason I returned to God, because he wouldn't let me go.”*

My point – God doesn't want to let us go either. This whole letter is about learning practical ways to trust God. Through it, James has stressed the need for a faith that actually works in our lives.

Now in today's scripture, he finishes his letter with another challenge to our trust in God... he gives us a word of encouragement, telling us not to let go of a brother or sister in Christ who have grown weary of trusting God and strayed away from his or her faith.

But in the world today and even in the church... there's a lot of misunderstandings about what we should do when we see a Christian wandering away from God. God has told us we are not judge or be critical of others.

So how can we reach out to these people?

Before we look at these last two verses in James, I want us to look back to James 4 and Matthew 7. I want us to see how the words of James and Jesus fit together and give us a backdrop to today's scripture; even if at first, we think they sound like they contradict each other.

First, remember James 4:11-12, he writes.

Do not criticize one another, my brothers. Whoever criticizes a Christian brother or judges him, criticizes the Law and judges it. If you judge the Law, then you are no longer one who obeys the Law, but one who judges it. God is the only lawgiver and judge. He alone can save and destroy. Who do you think you are, to judge your fellow-man? (GN) And remember, when the bible talks about man – it's talking about all humanity - everyone.

But here, James isn't forbidding Christians from confronting someone who has strayed from God; he's talking about slander. James is warning believers against backbiting and saying spiteful or hateful things about others. He's talking about people who enjoy cutting others down with a sharp or critical tongue.

- James is not keeping us from reaching out to someone who wandered from God and into a dangerous area of life.

In fact, Jesus stresses this point in Matthew 7:1-4 when He told his disciples:

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. 'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?' How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?

- Many Christians have read this passage boiled down to three words: **Do not judge!** But the question remains; **shouldn't a person be concerned about his or her fellow Christian?** Shouldn't we attempt to reach out to someone who is drifting in faith... or should we just let them suffer?

Well, Jesus answers that question in his next breath, in verse 5 we read,

*“You hypocrite, **first** take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”*

According to Jesus, there’s a place for taking specks out of other Christians’ eyes. It’s important to God that we be concerned about fellow believers and help remove specks in their eyes. **But remember, we’re talking about something extremely sensitive and there is nothing more sensitive than the eye.** And just as removing something from the eye takes extreme care and sensitivity, so does attempting to remove the spiritual speck from our fellow Christian’s eye.

So Jesus is not condoning people who feel they have been called to criticize others. Jesus is welcoming the help of those willing to have their spiritual eyes cleared before rescuing others.

To learn more about how to perform spiritual eye surgery, let’s turn to James closing words in chapter 5:19-20.

¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

First, let’s look at 3 points

1. **Who is James talking to?** James address’s “Brothers” and “one of you,” he’s speaking to **all Christians**.
2. **What has the person wondered from?** **The truth**, Gods principles and commandments! Bible commentator Spiros Zodhiates explains what wondering or straying from involves.

The truth James is talking about is naturally the person and work of Jesus Christ. He does not refer to some abstract philosophical or theological system, but to Christ Himself who said, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Of course, the word “truth” here also means all that Christ taught and instituted. It is His whole doctrinal and practical teaching – not teaching of any particular church or denomination, but of Christ. And where is this teaching to be found? In the Word of God, the bible.

3. **What should be done?** Now, this is sensitive part: removing the speck from a fellow Christian's eye. When Christians stray away from truth, James says **someone must turn them back**. We should love our neighbor, right? If you love a child, wouldn't you warn them if they are about to place their hand on a hot stove? Yes, so why not talk to a Christian wandering from God's truth!

Who should do it? James say's *any* Christian with a clear eye – anybody knowing truth must help those who struggling or straying. Don't ignore or throw criticisms at them from a distance like some people did to the young Christian I spoke about earlier, but swim out after them and don't let them go.

HOW TO DO IT?

Here's where we learn what to do and how to do it?

- **PROPER ATTITUDE.** Galatians 6:1-3 talks about the right attitude we need.

*Dear brothers and sisters, if another Christian is overcome by some sin, you who are **godly** should **gently** and **humbly** help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself. Share each others troubles and problems and in this way obey the law of Christ. If you think you are to important to help someone in need, you are only fooling yourself. You are really a nobody. (NLT)*

In other words, to correct a wandering Christian, we need 3 things:

1. **We must be Godly.** Paul said to his friends in Galatia that we must carefully follow God's truth and principles, not our own opinions. We must seek the Holy Spirit's help to correct the logs - the weakness and sins in our own eyes so we can see the truth clearly before we try to remove a speck from another's eye.
2. **We must be gentle.** Wandering Christians or as Paul calls "Carnal Christians" are usually sensitive to criticism, it takes time, patience, persistence and gentleness. Going after them with a harsh or critical spirit will only cause more hurt and rejection. But a gentle spirit encourages those who are wandering to relax and be reconciled to God.

3. **We must be humble.** Don't jump to conclusions and think you know what the problem and solution is. We must be careful and active listeners, be humble as we approach someone floundering in faith **and pray for them!**
- **Remember, correcting people is not fun.** It's hard talking to someone who strayed. Why? Because they don't want to hear it! **It's not fun rescuing someone who is kicking and fighting against you.** That's why only someone who is **really** humble is to do it! And humble people are often reluctant to step in because they know that they don't have the knowledge on their own. They pray for help as they humbly wade out to the struggling Christian, because it's out of Godly love.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A WANDERING CHRISTIAN IS RESTORED?

Getting back to James verse 20, we're told, "The one, who brings a person back, will save that person from death, and bring about the forgiveness of many sins."

1. **They will be saved from death.** I believe this means 2 things.
 - **Physical death.** One example, if a Christian is caught up in substance abuse, they can get killed in an accident if driving under the influence.
 - **Spiritual death.** Here's one example; when a married couple throw hateful barbs at each other, they can literally kill a relationship. If they aren't told the truth about what can happen and they continue to behaving like that, it **will** affect their relationship with God. But when we return another believer back to the Lord, we rescue them from a deathlike existence, a condition of loneliness, bitterness, depression, anguish and guilt. ***So why not reach out to these people?***
2. In closing, **they will receive forgiveness of many sins.** When someone is brought back into the fold through confession – admitting what they did. Repentance – deciding to not do it again.

They receive God's forgiveness and get delivered from the anguish their sinful behaviors is causing them... and they return to a full, rich relationship with God. God forgets every screw-up, every mistake and every failure when the Christian turns to God with a sorrowful heart and Jesus' forgiveness covers them.

This is the reason for Christmas; God came as a human baby and paid the unbelievable price for our sins. **A price he didn't owe and a price we could not pay.**