

[1]
“Going After Strays”
James 5:19, 20
January 24, 2016, Jeff Germo

When I was young I thought I was invincible. Can anyone relate? When I think back to some of the things that I did when I was younger I’m surprised that I’m still alive. My first memory of the delusion of my invincibility was when I was three or four years old. I had just watched superman on T.V.

And, of course, as you know, Superman is almost invincible except for his weakness to kryptonite. Anyway, I thought it would be pretty cool if I could fly like Superman so I went into the bathroom and got a towel and tied it around my neck and wandered outside without my mother seeing me. And I trundled off towards the baseball diamond at the school yard down the street where there were some bleachers that were probably about 12 feet high, but looked like about 30 feet high at my young age.

Well, I made my way to the top and dove off thinking that somehow this bath towel around my neck would give me super powers that would enable me to fly. Well, much to my chagrin, it didn’t. I dropped like a bag of potatoes and broke my arm. Well, that was the beginning of my life of learning that I’m not invincible.

I’ve broken several bones over the years from some of the stupid things I’ve done. I’ve broken my ankles several times, my knee once, my wrist, several of my fingers, some of my toes, my collar bone, and my nose. I got my teeth knocked out with a baseball bat.

When I was in my early twenties I was so short sighted I couldn’t see there was a very real possibility that diving off of the top of a trestle bridge into a little river might hurt. Actually it did sort of cross my mind, but there were girls around and I was trying to impress a certain young filly.

But, I lived my life as if it didn’t really matter what I did in the short term. I used to eat until I was stuffed and feeling sick and I can remember my mother telling me, “If you keep eating like that you’re going to look like your father.” I shrugged it off because I enjoyed the pleasure of eating.

And ever since Ruthie and I have been married, which is coming up to 30 years at the end of this year, she has encouraged me to make sure that I eat right and take care of my body because it’s going to start falling apart if I don’t. In our earlier years, I usually shrugged that off too. I thought I was invincible.

I was very active. I would play a lot of sports and do backpacking and canoeing and I thought this would just go on forever. Well, my mother and my wife were right. My body has started to fall apart because of neglect.

A few years ago I thought I would start running again and the first time out I ran too hard and pulled a muscle in my calf, which put a very quick end to my running career for that season. Then, after that healed, I thought I would start to work out at the gym and the first day I pushed it too hard and got a hernia.

A couple years after that I was playing tennis and pulled a muscle in my back, which put me out of commission for several weeks. A few weeks later I got a pinched nerve in my upper back and it was so painful that I had to go to physiotherapy for several weeks.

After I thought my back was healed up, that same muscle I pulled playing tennis spasmed on me. When I tried to start running again it caused my sciatic nerve to give me some grief, so once more, I had to get physio.

My body is falling apart. I'm 55 years old and if I don't take care of my body, I can easily feel like I'm 95. When I was younger, I naively thought I could just go through life and neglect taking care of my body with no consequence. I think I've learned my lesson.

Well, just as this is true for our physical bodies it is also true for our spirits. We try to go through our lives without taking care of our spiritual needs and we think it does not affect us. We neglect taking a quiet time with God because we have more important and urgent things to do. We neglect immersing ourselves in God's Word because we think we don't need it. We don't see the immediate benefit.

We don't take the time to pray about the decisions we make. We don't participate in fellowship. We don't watch how we use our tongues. We don't give a tithe to the Lord's work because, well, what good is it all doing anyway? And then our lives start falling apart.

And we realize we don't have the spiritual or emotional fortitude to stand up under all the pressure. And then perhaps we get bitter, and we blame God, or the church, for our lot in life, and we wander off looking for other things that will satisfy, because obviously our version of "Christianity" didn't work.

Or, hopefully, we get a wake up call that we need to take care of those things we have neglected all these years. We realize we can't go through life at warp speed and forget about taking care of our spiritual side either.

That is what the book of James is about. It is about the community of faith taking seriously its call to authentically follow Jesus. One of the unfortunate things that has happened in the western evangelical church is that pastors have become professionals.

We take our vehicles to professionals to get repaired. Especially these days. It used to be I could repair almost anything that broke down in my car. That was back in the days before computers. Now things are too complicated for most of us.

If we need surgery we usually don't self administer the procedure. We need a professional. There are many things we need professionals for.

When it comes to our relationship with God, though, it is different. Yes, as a pastor, I have studied quite a bit and so I have a pretty good picture of God's revelation through Scripture. The problem with

seeing the pastor as a professional, though, is we can give the impression that the pastor is responsible for our spiritual growth.

We end up not knowing how to feed ourselves. We don't touch our Bibles during the week because we can come and get our fill from the pastor. It's like a bunch of pigs running to the trough at feeding time. What's the result? Baby Christians who think they are mature because they have received their fill from the pastor on Sunday.

Notice that, with one exception, James was written to the average Christian. Out of 54 imperatives the only one that relates to the clergy was from last week when the sick person was directed to call for the elders of the church to pray for them. Even then the initiative was to come from the so called "lay person" who was sick. It was written *to* the average person in the congregation.

All through the letter James urges us to live out our faith in practical ways. He says, if the seed of the gospel has landed in a soft and fertile heart there will be fruits of righteousness – more love, more joy, more peace, more patience, more gentleness... There will be change. There will be a new and increasing desire to live in love and unity with each other.

Every single imperative in James has to do with either how to love God or how to love people, and the vast majority have to do with how to love people, which makes perfect sense since Jesus said that when we love people we love him. You cannot separate loving God from loving people.

We are on our last sermon from the Epistle of James. Next week we are going to do a whirlwind survey of the book. And after the service we are going to have a Remember and Celebrate potluck together. I'm excited about this because I have heard from so many of you how you have been growing through the James series. I am hoping that some of you will be brave enough to encourage the rest of us with how you have seen God work in your life through this series.

James doesn't close off his letter with any of the greetings that we're used to in Paul's letters. There are no niceties. He gives no benediction. He closes off very abruptly with another imperative.

It's two verses, but only one sentence. And within this short passage are some very important truths about the Christian life.

[2]

James 5:19-20 (ESV)

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.

There are four truths I want you to see here.

[3]

1. Your faith is not a private matter

[4]

2. As Christ-followers we have a responsibility to help each other stay on the narrow path
[5]
3. Sin is not a trivial matter
[6]
4. Bringing back someone who wanders from the truth reins in a chain reaction of sins

So, James begins this passage the same way he began several of his other passages; ***“My brothers.”***
[7]

At least a dozen times in this short letter James calls the readers of his letter ‘brothers.’ And when he says brothers he is not just talking to the men. Brothers in this context means brothers and sisters. It means family. It’s really important to remember that. We are family. If you are a follower of Jesus and you have received his forgiveness we are family. That’s pretty cool! And it comes with a lot of responsibility. We have a duty to help each other grow and make sure we don’t do anything that would cause each other to stumble.

So, James’ tone in this this letter is very pastoral. These are people he loves dearly and he wants them to know the difficult things he has been telling them are for their own good.

Now, I want you to notice that this wandering person James is talking about in verse 9 is from among the body of believers. He is a professing Christ-follower.

[8]

James 5:19 (ESV)

¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth...

So, this is not talking about going and seeking lost people. The context is that these are people from within the body of Christ who have somehow lost their way. James doesn’t say what the reason is. It could be any number of things, but something has distracted them so the truth of the gospel is no longer important to them and they have wandered away.

Remember the parable of the soils Jesus told. It’s told in all three synoptic Gospels. Let’s turn to Luke and look at part of it. Jesus has already told them the parable. It confuses the disciples so they ask him to explain it to them and here’s what he says.

[9]

Luke 8:11-15 (ESV)

¹¹ Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. ¹² The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. ¹³ And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.

[10]

¹⁴ And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. ¹⁵ As for

that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.

Now, remember the person James was talking about was someone from among them who wandered off away from the truth. And these people Jesus is talking about in Luke 8 could be believers as well. There are lots of different reasons why the Word of God might not take root in a person's heart. And anyone of these reasons could refer to you or me at any given time in our lives.

[11]

First of all, he says maybe their hearts are hard. Maybe they are angry, bitter people. Maybe they think they know it all and God's Word cannot penetrate, and so they wander off on their own way.

[12]

Or, maybe their faith is shallow. They are in it for what it can do for them. Ruthie and I went to Bible college with some people who would say they are no longer believers. I'm not exactly sure why, but they were all excited about their faith at first, but then didn't get from it what they were expecting and so they wandered from the truth.

[13]

And then Jesus said there are those who were more concerned with the things of earth, like pleasure or getting rich. They get distracted by things that glitter, like a fish grabbing on to a shiny lure only to be reeled in to certain death. And Jesus said the person with this kind of heart is too immature to bear fruit.

[14]

And then, of course, he says there is another kind of person with a good, soft, fertile heart. They not only receive the Word, but it gets planted deep and it bears a lot of the fruit of obedience. They continually get filled with more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

[15]

So, back to James. He says, if anyone from among us wanders off away from the truth of God's Word, that is, away from any of the things he has exhorted us to do in the previous verses, go get them back.

This leads us to our first point.

[16]

1. Your Faith is Not A Private Matter

I know this goes against our values as Western Evangelicals, and especially as Baptists. One of the tenets of Baptist identity is "Individual Soul Liberty." That means each of us as individuals has the right to interpret Scripture without the church or any other individual forcing their beliefs on us. And this is very true. Our belief in God and what he has done on the cross through the death and resurrection of Jesus two thousand years ago cannot be forced on us by the church or by another individual. We make that choice ourselves. Nobody can make it for us.

However, this does not mean we are not accountable to each other. James has just finished writing in the previous passage that we should confess our sins to each other. That infers accountability.

[17]

The writer of Hebrews said we are to consider how to spur one another on to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24).

Paul told the **Colossians**,

[18]

¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom,
(Colossians 3:16)

Your faith is not a private matter.

There's an old cowboy song I heard in the 70s that goes like this.

[19]

***Me and Jesus got our own thing goin
Me and Jesus got it all worked out
Me and Jesus got our own thing goin
We don't need anybody to tell us what its all about***

Now, the writer of this song may not have meant it this way, but it sort of sounds like he doesn't need anybody but him and Jesus. The guy that wrote this song also wrote one called "***I Like Beer.***" So, I guess he needs Jesus, *and* beer.

We like to think that we can live our lives independently. But, that is not what the church is. Paul described the church in 1 Corinthians as a body with many parts that are each *interdependent* on one another. We cannot get along without each other. I need you and you need me, and we all need each other because none of us has all the gifts. And the gifts that God has given us are to be used to build each other up. They are not given to us for our sake alone. They are not given to build and puff ourselves up. They are given to build up the church.

So James says,

[20]

James 5:19

¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back,...

[21]

2. We have a responsibility to help each other stay on the narrow path.

There are so many distractions out there in the world that it is so easy for us to get sucked into a wrong way of thinking. We've talked about those distractions before as a raging river that we attempt to walk against. It pulls on us to try to get our eyes off of Christ and his way of living and it takes everything we have, along with the grace of God, to push against the current.

Friends we need our community of faith to help us stay on that narrow path, which means we need to be purposeful about allowing ourselves to be accountable to each other. We need to posture ourselves

in humility and recognize we are all in the same boat. As I have said, ad nauseam, we are train wrecks. I am not okay, and you are not okay. And that's okay. But, it's not okay to stay there.

The wanderer is not to be left to their own devices, James says. The burden is on the community of faith to bring him back.

[22]

3. Sin is not a trivial matter.

²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death...

We dare not think that we can just go on with our lives and live them any way we want and think God is going to turn a blind eye.

[23]

1 Peter 1:13-19 (ESV)

¹³ Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹⁴ As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct,

[24]

¹⁶ since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." ¹⁷ And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, ¹⁸ knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

Our sin cost Jesus his life. It was a huge price God paid to buy us back. To take our sin lightly is to make a mockery of the cross of Christ. Sin is not a trivial matter.

Lastly,

[25]

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.

What does it mean that it will cover a multitude of sins? Well, there are several ideas as to what this might mean, but let me tell you what I think it means.

[26]

4. Bringing back someone who has wandered from the truth reins in a chain reaction of sins

I think it's quite simple. I think it just means that one sin leads to another. Sin has a ripple effect. Take the example in the Old Testament of David's sin against Bathsheba. He sees her bathing. What does he do? He could have turned away and put it out of his mind and that would have been the end of it. What

did he do instead? One look turned into a gaze. The gaze turned into lust. Lust turned into an invitation. The invitation turned into adultery and then adultery to murder. That's how it is with sin.

And that is exactly how James describes the process in chapter 1.

[27]

James 1:14-15 (ESV)

¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

So, I think what James is saying in chapter 5:20 is that by going after and bringing back someone who has wandered from the truth we will rein in a chain reaction of sins. One sin leads to another that affects not just them, but others as well.

Friends, this is the body of Christ in action. Our faith is not just a private matter. And sin is not a trivial matter. It grieves the heart of God. It hurts all our relationships. And we should love each other so much that we are willing to take the risk of being misunderstood if we have to confront someone in love in order to woo them back into the family.

I give you permission to love me that much, and I hope you will give me the same.



Going After Strays
James 5:19-20
Week of January 24th, 2016

Objective of this study: To understand God's heart for us and our responsibility to help each other grow.

January 31st after the service we will be having a potluck and looking back to how God spoke to us through the James series. Please be ready to share your journey with your faith community. It's going to be exciting!

[Remember, the main goal of each Growth Group is to allow God's Word to change your heart so that others would see Jesus in you and be likewise changed to be like him. He wants to change the world through us]

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.
2. Spend five minutes in silence asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
3. After the five minutes have someone interrupt the silence and read **Psalm 23** meditatively to the group. Pause after each phrase letting God speak to you.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

Share a story of when you thought you were "invincible."

Word/Work (60 minutes)

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read James 5:19-20 four times carefully. Absorb it.
 1. James expresses in this passage that our faith is not just a private matter between us and God. We actually are responsible to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Let's flesh this out a bit. Imagine you have wandered from God in some way, or you are dabbling in some kind of sin, or your heart has become hardened. How would you appreciate your brother or sister in Christ to reach out to you? What would work? What would not work?
3. Break into a couple groups and divide these passages: a) Ephesians 4:1-16; b) Colossians 3:12-17 & Hebrews 10:24. Regroup and debrief what the writers say body life looks like for Christ-followers.
4. Take some time now to share with each other how others have done this for you.
5. Spend some time in prayer for each other.
6. Are there some stories of growth you can share with the larger community of faith next Sunday? How have you grown through the James series?