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James # 23
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Sermon Summary #22

“Am I my Brother’s Keeper?” You Bet You Are! James 5:19-20

If every Christian isn’t familiar with 2 Timothy 3:16-17, every Christian *should* be. There the Apostle Paul made what most believe is the most important statement in the Bible about the Bible. He said:

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Think for a moment about those words: *teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness, equipped for every good work*. If those describe the function of Scripture, then the epistle of James has served us well. Today is our 22nd and final study in this remarkable NT book, and I think all who have been here for these 22 messages would agree that James has taught us much: about the relationship between faith and good works, about the nature of trials and temptations, and more recently about physical healing.

I can only speak for myself but I have experienced reproof and correction on several occasions, the most obvious being the use of my tongue or my speech and the ways in which I pass judgment on other people. And I hope that by God’s good grace and the power of the Holy Spirit I have been trained in how to live a righteous life. The purpose of James is a very practical one, in keeping with what Paul said in 2 Timothy 3, namely, *to equip us for every good work*. That is why I feel a measure of sadness that our study of this book must today come to an end. I can only hope and pray that its impact on my life will never come to an end.

James is unlike most other NT epistles in that it has *no formal conclusion*. There are no words of greeting, no requests for prayer, no biographical information about the author, no exhortation to “greet one another with a holy kiss” or “I hope by God’s grace to see your faces soon” or any such concluding comment.

The obvious question is: Why? Why the abrupt ending? It may be that James didn’t want the urgency of paying heed to his exhortations to be lost in some formal conclusion. I think that may be right. I believe the abruptness with which it ends is intentional on James’ part. I believe he wanted to leave us with *a sense of personal urgency* as we consider the critical importance of his final exhortation. If that is the case, we need to pay close attention to what these two short verses have to say.

Context

There are *two competing interpretations* of this short two-verse passage and much depends on how we understand the relationship of vv. 19-20 to the immediately preceding context. I have to admit I haven’t as yet decided which of the two views is correct.

Some believe James 5:19-20 is simply a conclusion to the entire epistle. The “wandering” from the “truth” described here would have in view anyone who failed to pay heed to the instructions James has given us in the letter. If that is the case, the point of these two verses is to call all of us into action when anyone in our church family begins to drift morally or theologically.

But it’s also possible that James intends for these two verses to be taken in close connection with vv. 13-18. If that is the case, it will greatly affect how we understand his language. So let’s begin by looking closely at the terms used in James’ exhortation.

The “Wanderer”

The opening words of v. 19 alert us to the fact that this is an *in-house matter*. That is to say, it concerns the spiritual family of God. In our case, James would be talking about our responsibility to anyone here at Bridgeway who might wander from the truth.

The fact that James identifies this “wanderer” as “*anyone* among you,” that is to say, you “brothers” (and “sisters”), is an indication that *he regards this person who is in spiritual danger as being a Christian*. Of course, he may *not* be a Christian, but James is giving him/her the benefit of the doubt until proven otherwise by how they respond to the appeal made to them by others in the local church.

So what does it mean for a Christian to “*wander from the truth*”? He probably has in mind any departure from what God has revealed to be his will for his children.

It could be *moral* wandering, which is to say, some ethical choice or choices a person makes. Perhaps there is a particular moral imperative that James has addressed in the letter that this person has ignored or deliberately violated. James may have in view the “double-minded man” he talked about in James 1:8. Or it may be uncontrolled outbursts of “anger”. James spoke of this in James 1:19-20. It may be the “filthiness and rampant wickedness” he warned us against in James 1:21. You will remember that in James 2 he warned us against social prejudice in which wealthy and influential people are given preferential treatment above the poor. In chapter three it was the misuse of our speech and the ways in which we “curse people” (James 2:9). In chapter four it was “quarrels” (4:1) and “pride” (4:6).

Then again it may be *theological* or *doctrinal* “wandering,” which is to say, someone may be deviating from the fundamental truths of the Christian faith and on the verge of embracing some heretical notion or denying some essential truth of the faith.

Whichever of these he has in mind, or perhaps even both, the point is that *he envisions someone in our spiritual family who has “wandered” from the truth of Christianity and has put themselves in danger of divine discipline*.

It is very important that you and I recognize that *we are all responsible* to step in and provide corrective love when we see this happen. No Christian can stand idly by while another Christian gradually drifts into sin and say, “Well, this is America after all. Each of us is an individual who must give account of himself. The bottom line is that *it really isn’t any of my business*.” Oh yes it is! The men and women in this local church, as in every local church, are not like the men and women in the state of Oklahoma who can live however they please and believe whatever they want and never be bothered or held accountable. *We are all accountable to one another at Bridgeway*. We are a spiritual family in the truest, and yet most loving, sense. The Apostle Paul told the Ephesian Christians to “speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another” (Eph. 4:25).

“Wait a minute, Sam. Are you saying I am to be my brother’s keeper?” Absolutely! Of course you are. You are your sister’s keeper too! One essential element in genuine community is that we speak lovingly into each other’s lives and warn one another if we see any one person wandering from the truth. That is why our *D-groups* play such an important role in our growth into spiritual maturity in the image of Jesus.

So, you are not exempt from obeying this passage. You cannot say, “Well, I have no business sticking my nose into his/her business. After all, this is a free country. They can do whatever they please.” You may well say that about the person who lives across the street from you or some candidate running for political office, or perhaps that individual in the cubicle next to you at the office. *But you cannot and must not say that about the person sitting in the chair next to you this morning or the individual who worships God next to you or the man or woman who celebrates the Lord’s Supper with you*.

I should point out that James is far from being the only biblical author who makes this point. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul said this:

“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. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1-2).

Neither Paul nor James nor any other biblical author is telling us to meddle in someone's private affairs where we have no business sticking in our noses. He's not calling for Christians to act as secret police or eavesdroppers who are always on the lookout for the slightest mistake on the part of others. Rather, they are calling on us *to lovingly and gently help one another*, especially when one in particular appears to be on the verge of a fall.

Back in James 5:14-15 we saw that the Elders have a responsibility to pray for those who call on them for help. We also saw in 5:16-18 that we are all responsible to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another to be healed. Here again in 5:19-20 the call is one that goes beyond Elders or Pastors or Community Group leaders and lands on every one who is a part of this covenant community. *We must all take seriously not only our own spiritual growth and our own personal faithfulness to God but also that of every other member of this body of believers.*

Notice the language in v. 19 where it says *"someone brings him back"* (v. 19b). If you are reading the King James Version you will observe that it translates this word as "convert". In other words, "if anyone converts him." That's not a good rendering of the word. It suggests that this person who is wandering is an unbeliever and you are making an effort to help him/her come to saving faith in Jesus. Of course, you should be able and open to leading a person to personal conversion and faith in Jesus, but that is not what James is talking about.

The idea here is "to turn around" or "to turn back" another Christian believer from going in the wrong moral or theological direction.

Notice that there are *two results* from successfully bringing back a sinner from his/her mistaken beliefs or behavior. **First**, you will be instrumental in saving his/her soul from death. **Second**, you will have been used of God in covering a multitude of sins (v. 20). What does James mean by this? This is where the two competing interpretations come into play.

Before I delve into the two options, know for certain two things. First, the word *"soul"* here in v. 20 does not mean simply the immaterial or spiritual dimension of an individual. *"Soul" is used as a comprehensive term. It simply means the "person" as a whole: both the physical and non-physical dimensions of our being.* In other words, we could as easily render this: "will save *him* from death" or "will save *her* from death." You may recall that back in James 1:21 our author told us to "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your *souls*," that is, is able to save *you*.

A second thing to remember is that the *"multitude of sins"* that are covered are those of the person who is wandering from the truth. James isn't saying that as a reward for your stepping in and redirecting this person away from error that God will cover *your* sins. The "sins" here are those of the person who is wandering.

Now we are prepared to answer the question: What does it mean to *"save"* this individual from death? And what kind of *"death"* does James have in mind?

Perseverance is a Community Project

One view is that *the "death" in view is eternal, spiritual death or eternal condemnation, being cut off forever from the presence of God.* If that is correct, the salvation in view is also spiritual. Thus, according to this view the result of turning back a wandering person from error is that *you have been used by God to deliver this person from eternal separation and judgment.*

Now, if this view is correct, does that mean James envisioned the possibility of a true born-again Christian losing his/her salvation, and that your responsibility is to bring them to their spiritual senses so that they won't apostatize from the faith? No.

Here is how John Piper interprets what James is saying. It remains for us to decide whether John is correct (see "Bringing Back a Wandering Believer," November 26, 2015).

John correctly reminds us that *the New Testament writers do not assume that everyone in the church is necessarily going to persevere to the end and be saved*. They treat people who have made a profession of faith as true members of the covenant community, giving them the benefit of the doubt. James calls them all “brothers” in verse 19.

But he does not assume that everyone whom he *calls* a brother is *in fact* a brother. And so he warns the whole church that straying away from the faith into persistent sin will lead to death without forgiveness. *The final proof of who is a brother and who is not is perseverance IN faith, not profession OF faith.*

James assumes exactly what the Apostle John assumes in 1 John 2:19. Some people had left the faith and the church without being persuaded to turn back. The Apostle John (not Piper!) said,

“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” (1 John 2:19).

So John and James recognize that not everyone who says, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom (Matt. 7:21). *Therefore even in the new covenant community – like Bridgeway – we must warn each other about the tremendous danger and deceitfulness of sin, and how it can become so attractive that it pulls a person beyond the point of no return.* This is the covenant warning that we need from each other again and again.

There are far too many who play with sin and presume upon grace, and do not realize that they can make shipwreck of their lives and die without forgiveness, even though they *claimed* to be Christians and belonged *outwardly* to a new covenant community. But as the Apostle John said, they were never truly “of us,” that is to say, they never truly shared our spiritual life and the salvation brought to us by Jesus.

Make no mistake: our security in the New Covenant rests in God's keeping power. “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). “[He] will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8). Jude declared that God “is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy” (Jude 24). And Paul again said in Romans 8:30 that “those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30).

Our security is in God. Our security is the New Covenant commitment of God to produce in us the faith and the obedience and perseverance we need to endure to the end and be saved. That is our security.

But what James makes clear is that *God often does his preserving work through human means* (see Heb. 3:12-13). Security in our salvation is certain for God's elect. But eternal security is a community project. Covenant security is not a mechanical or automatic thing. It depends on God, and God uses means. And often the means or instrument he uses is another Christian who intervenes to call a wandering person back to truth.

Simply put: *God uses means to keep us secure.* And the measure of our security and our joy in this church will be the degree to which we use the means of grace to turn each other back from straying and keep each other safe in the love of God that covers the multitude of our sins.

In a recent article on this very text (“5 Truths about Eternal Security”), Piper summed up his view in five short statements:

- (1) We are justified by grace alone through faith alone apart from works (Eph. 2:8–9; Rom. 3:28).
- (2) Those who are justified will *certainly* be glorified (Rom. 8:30).
- (3) But no one will be glorified or finally saved who does not continue in the faith (1 Cor. 15:1–2; Col. 1:21–23; Matt. 10:22).
- (4) God himself *will* keep his children from finally falling away (Phil. 1:6; 1 Cor. 1:8–9).
- (5) *God keeps his children by means of his children* (Heb. 3:13–14).

On this view, then, if the person who wanders from the truth does *not* eventually turn around, or is *not* eventually brought back, he/she will give evidence that they *never* truly knew Jesus in a saving way. He/she will perish eternally.

Let me be clear. I completely agree with John on this point. I agree with all five of his concluding principles. But I'm not sure I agree with him that this is what James is talking about here in vv. 19-20.

Delivering a Believer from Physical Death

The other interpretive option is based on taking careful note of how the terms "save" and "death" are used in the immediate context of James 5. The term "save" referred to in v. 20 and the "death" from which he is delivered should be defined in light of how James has just used them.

Just a few verses earlier in 5:15 James used the term "save" to describe *physical restoration from illness*. I pointed out to you when we looked at this passage that physical healing is often described as "salvation" in the NT. Jesus told the woman who touched the hem of his garment that her faith had "saved" her, and he was referring to her physical healing from the issue of blood that had plagued her for many years.

Therefore, the "death" here may well be physical death, not spiritual death. Again, in vv. 14-15 it is deliverance from or the prevention of a premature *physical* death that is in view. Thus, James would here be encouraging us to be diligent to restore to repentance any true believer, any brother or sister who has strayed from the truth. In doing so, we will have been instrumental in delivering or saving them from premature physical death (under the discipline of the Lord; cf. 1 Cor. 11:30-32; Acts 5:1ff.).

Simply put, on this view there is nothing in this passage that might lead us to believe a true Christian could lose his or her salvation.

Which of these two views is correct may be something we can't decide with any degree of certainty. Of course, there is always the possibility of yet another view being correct. But what I most want you to recognize is that *the primary emphasis of James is on our responsibility to be the instrument or means by which mutual restoration is achieved*. The point of the passage is the urgent task that falls on each of us to seek to restore and reconcile a fellow believer who is wandering from the truth.

As important as prayer is in the body of Christ, and James 5:13-18 taught us that it is absolutely essential, *sometimes prayer isn't enough*. Sometimes merely praying for a brother or sister to turn their lives around isn't enough. You must actually and personally and literally go to them and lovingly and humbly insert yourself into their life and be used of God to turn them from the error of their ways.

By all means continue to pray for one another. Pray that God would open their eyes to the danger of their ways. Pray that the Spirit would bring conviction to them of what they are doing. But don't stop there. God may be calling you to sit down with them to alert them to the misdirection their lives have taken and in doing so protect them from coming under the severe disciplinary hand of the Lord, a discipline that may well result in physical death.

It's at this point that I can hear some of you thinking to yourselves:

"Sam, this feels really scary to me. This makes me incredibly nervous. It almost sounds as if you're saying that people should go around sticking their noses into the private and personal lives of other people, meddling in their affairs, and making moral judgments about how they live. That sounds more like a cult than it does a local church."

Well, yes, when you put it like that, it does sound more like a cult! But that is not what James is recommending to us.

The first thing you must determine is *whether or not you are sufficiently well-known by other people that they would feel the freedom to speak into your life when it becomes necessary*. If you are isolated and closed off from others, if you have shut down access to your heart and you are accountable to no one other than yourself, then this passage will undoubtedly feel unsafe to you. And there are plenty of people in every local church who actually prefer it that way. I may be stepping on toes when I say this, but it needs to be said. You may be among those who simply want to show up on a Sunday and enjoy the service, but you have no desire to contribute to the life of this spiritual family and you have even less of a desire that others know you well enough to be involved in your life. You just want to be left alone.

Please understand something. If that is you, there is nothing anyone can do about that. And if that is your desire, we will honor your decision and not pry into matters that you don't believe concern us. We will never, ever try to coerce or compel someone to get involved in the community life of this spiritual family. That is a decision that you alone can make.

But I will repeatedly and urgently plead with you to move into community, if not here at Bridgeway, then somewhere else. Why? ***Because it is a matter of life and death***, and that's not an exaggeration. James says it right here in this passage. If you are on a path in life, a moral and theological trajectory, so to speak, that may well put your soul at risk of death (whether that death is eternal or physical), it is crucial that other people know you well enough and be closely embedded in your life that they would feel both the responsibility and freedom to speak to you and, as James says, "bring you back" from your "wandering".

Your "wandering" from the truth is not just an issue of the choices you make. It is an issue of life and death. So let me ask you a simple but critically important question. ***To whom are you accountable? Who knows you well enough that they could detect any "wandering" in your life? Who are the men or women in this local church that you have authorized and empowered to speak into your life?*** To whom have you gone and said, "Hey, look, I need the safety and encouragement and the rebuke of other Christians should I go astray. I am asking you, I am authorizing you, to bring to my attention anything you might see about me that is of concern. Please don't let me wander from the truth. I give you complete freedom and the right to ask me any question that needs to be asked. I authorize you to call me to account if something in my behavior or beliefs raises red flags."

As I said, that may sound scary to some of you. You may prefer to live secretly and in insolation from others. You may think that you have everything under control and there isn't a snowball's chance in hell that you would ever "wander from the truth." If that is true, I can only pray and then hope that the Holy Spirit will reveal to you how ***indescribably naïve and arrogant such an attitude is***. As the Apostle Paul said to the church in Corinth: "let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

We will do everything within our power, or I should say within the power that the Holy Spirit provides, to help you get involved in community here at Bridgeway. We will do everything possible to be biblical and compassionate and honest and loving to help you become a more vibrant and vulnerable member of this spiritual family. ***We will not permit for a second the sort of legalistic, overbearing, intrusive control that is so characteristics of cults, and sadly of some churches***. I've been in the local church for 65 years, and I can honestly say without apology that this is the healthiest and safest one of all. We aren't perfect, but this is a place where you can find genuine love and compassion and truthfulness so that you can walk in the truth rather than wander from it.

After all, as James makes so unmistakably clear, this really is a matter of life and death.

Summing up the Epistle of James

It's important that we not simply conclude on that note. We must think back over what James has taught us and ask ourselves: ***"How am I doing? Is my life any different from what it was like before we started this series of studies?"*** So let's ask some important questions of ourselves.

First, am I becoming more patient in the trials of life, as described in James 2:2-8? Have the challenges and obstacles and even painful encounters in my life served to make me more dependent on God? Have they been used to transform me so that I look and talk and act more like Jesus, or have I allowed them to create bitterness and anger and resentment?

Second, has my perspective on wealth changed at all, or is it the same? Do I see earthly riches in the same light that God does, as expressed both in James 2:1-7 and again in James 5:1-6?

Third, how am I dealing with temptation (James 1:12-15)? Do I toy with it? Do I tinker with it? Do I nibble at it around the edges? Do I treat it flippantly? Or do I vigorously resist and reject and run away from it?

Fourth, what is my attitude now toward those who are less well off financially and socially despised? Do I cater to the wealthy at the expense of the poor (James 2:1-7)? Do I still only treat people on the basis of what I think they can

do for me? Do I pass judgment on them based on physical or educational or vocational realities, or on the basis of the fact that they, like me, are created in the image of God and thus of immeasurable value?

Fifth, what's up with my speech (James 3:1-12)? Do people close to me notice any difference in how I use my tongue? Or am I still the same old verbally critical and abusive person I used to be?

Sixth, how am I doing when it comes to humility, as described in James 3:13-18 and again in James 4:6?

Seventh, am I living in such a way that people would describe me as a friend of the world, or am I a true friend of God? Am I still flirting with the world? Am I carrying on an affair with the world? Have I committed spiritual adultery against God by giving in to the seductive allure of what the world has to offer? Or am I living faithfully in covenant love and affection for God? On this see James 4:1-5.

Eighth, do I still make plans as if I am ultimately in control of my life? Or do I recognize that my life, as we were told in James 4:13-17, is but a vapor, a mist in the wind, here one moment and gone the next? Do I make plans for the future submissive to the overruling providential will of God? Or does my will reign supreme?

Ninth, is my prayer life any different from what it was before we spent four weeks studying James 5:13-18? Do others come to me asking that I pray for them? If they do, how do I respond? Am I more expectant of what God might do in response to prayer than I used to be? Or is prayer merely a lifeless and meaningless religious ritual that I engage in to impress others?

Tenth, and finally, do I know of a brother or sister who is wandering from the truth, who needs my help? And if I do, what will I do about it? Ignore it? Rationalize doing nothing? Or will I obey James and with humility and tenderness and genuine heart-felt love step in and try to turn them around?

So I ask in conclusion: Are the truths of this epistle only a faint memory, or are they still alive and powerful and life-changing? May it always be the latter!