

BRENTWOOD BAPTIST

TRIALS AND MATURITY • SEARCH AND RESCUE • JAMES 5:19-20 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

We must do our part to keep people connected to the faith.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Over the course of your life, has there ever been something you were intensely interested in for a while, but over time your interest waned? What led to your change of heart?

If we aren't careful, how can our pursuit of the Lord become just another interest in our lives? Have you ever felt this struggle? Share if you feel comfortable.

Most of our interests are not maintained throughout the course of our lives; they wax and wane as time goes by. Maybe it's a sports team that you became interested in during a play-off run, or that TV show you could never miss but now doesn't capture your attention. Tastes and interests change. However, if we aren't careful, we can treat our faith like another phase. You likely know people who were really involved and exhibited vibrant faith, but now are nowhere to be found. It almost seems as if they had never been Christians at all. Our response to these people cannot be neutral. We must be doers of the Word (Jas. 1:23)—and the Word tells us that we must go after them.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 5:19-20.

James used the word “wander” to describe the process of distancing ourselves from faith. When you think about wandering, what is involved? What does this teach us about the process of wandering from our faith?

Read Hebrews 2:1-4. Why should this idea of wandering be frightening to us? What word did the author of Hebrews use to describe this process? What is at stake?

Who is being spoken about in both of these passages? Why are these verses not speaking about someone losing their salvation?

In the language of the New Testament the word “wander,” as James used it, means “to proceed without a sense of proper direction.” A different but similar word is used in the Book of Hebrews to describe the process of walking away. In both cases, these verses are passive. They describe something that happens to us rather than something we seek out. The lesson for us is that if we are not vigilant, we too can drift from the faith. Our spiritual life can become something we pay less and less attention to and eventually give up all together. But God is able to complete the work He starts, and it is not possible for someone to lose their salvation. So that means those who wander are in one of two camps: 1) True Christians who have momentarily forgotten the truth, or 2) people who never truly believed to begin with.

James wrote that people were wandering from “the truth.” What is “the truth” in the context of this letter? What reasons might people have for wandering from this truth?

At the end of all the reasons we can come up with, what is the real reason that anyone would wander from the truth?

What proactive processes can we put in place to help us cling to and remember the truth of Scripture, so that we are less inclined to walk away from it?

“The truth” refers to the gospel of Jesus Christ—the truth that we are hopelessly sinful and lost, but that out of His goodness and grace Jesus sought us when we were “sinners, condemned, unclean,” as the famous hymn says. Any time we wander, we allow sin to convince us that the gospel is not that important. We have ceased to deeply believe its truth. This is why spiritual disciplines like prayer, Bible reading, worship, and fellowship are so important even when we don’t “feel like it.” These are vital practices that help us see how the truth of the gospel comes to bear on our lives. These practices don’t make us any more or any less saved or loved by God, but they drive the truth deeper into our hearts in a way that bears fruit in our lives. When the gospel becomes real to us, we will do whatever it takes to bring people to it.

Look at the three parables in Luke 15. What common themes do you notice? What lengths did God go to in order to seek you? Why should this motivate us to seek others who are wandering?

Why do we have the tendency to look at people who are wandering and think, “That’s not my problem”? How is this thinking unbiblical?

Luke 15 features a series of parables where lost things of increasing value (a sheep, a coin, and a son) are lost and then found. In each case, the seeker gives much energy and attention to seeking and recovering that which is lost. In these parables, the seeker is always God. Because He leaves the 99 to search for the one, because He shines a lamp into every dark corner of a room, and because He throws a party for the rebellious and ungrateful son, we must seek the lost. To be like Christ means to intentionally seek the lost because they are precious to God. The gospel means that God’s mission is our mission, so we must be serious about what He is serious about—seeking the wandering. James wrote that “someone should bring him back.” You don’t have to look far to figure out which “someone” James was referring to—you can rest assured that it is you. You are the someone called to go after the lost.

When we go after those who are wandering, what should be the goal of our search? What hope can we offer them as they return?

How do we ensure that when we seek the wanderer, the goal is restoration and not “I told you so’s”? As they come back, how should we treat them?

Read 1 Peter 4:8 and Proverbs 10:12. What does it look like to practically love those who return after wandering?

The goal in pursuing the wandering is always restoration. This is what God wants, and it is what we should want. This is not to say that there aren’t consequences if the wandering has led into sin, but we must not hold sins over people when God doesn’t. We must warmly accept and love all who return because restoration and love is the goal, not judgment. We must be doers of the Word even when it is difficult. This means that we love and embrace returning wanderers and embrace them as God embraces them.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What potential hang-ups or fears do you have that would keep you from chasing after someone who has wandered from the faith? Work through these as a group.

What should we do if someone who regularly attends this group wanders from the faith? Why can't we assume that it will never happen to us?

Does anyone have experience going after someone who walked away from the faith? What happened? Has anyone come up in your mind through the sermon or our discussion? What can you do to take action, and how can we hold you accountable?

PRAYER

Praise God that He cares so much about the one that He will leave the 99 to bring the lost one back. Ask that we would have God's heart for the lost and wandering. Pray for those who have walked away, as well as for those who do not even realize they are lost. Pray that Christ would fill you with compassion that mirrors His own.

COMMENTARY

| JAMES 5:19-20

James concludes by offering commendation for those who rescue straying believers.

5:19. This verse focuses on the spiritually sick and outlines how to reclaim and restore them. To wander from the truth describes someone who has made a serious error, either in doctrine or in Christian living. To bring him back describes someone who returned to Christ after having left.

The text here (vv. 19-20) discusses professing believers. The reference to one of you suggests that those involved claimed to be Christians. The fact that the professing believer wandered away indicated a serious spiritual lapse.

The act of bringing someone back is not a reference to conversion in the normal Christian sense. It is a description of reclaiming a professing Christian who has wandered into sin. God's grace has brought the wanderer home, and the backsliding is over.

Those who claim to know Christ but live in persistent disobedience show that their claim to know Christ is empty and wrong. They demonstrate that they were never believers at

any time. Genuine believers will never lose their salvation. Some who are true believers may wander into sin. The Bible commends us when we exert our best efforts to bring wandering believers back to full commitment.

5:20. Those who work to return straying believers receive two promises. First, the wanderer is saved from death. The repentant wanderer avoided spiritual ruin. Sin destroys, and if people persist in following sin, they will experience eternal separation from God, that is, eternal death (see the clear statement in Jas. 1:13-15). Reclaiming such a person is worth the effort.

Some interpreters understand death to refer to physical death. They see this type of death as a punishment for sin. The text seems to go farther than this and speak of eternal death, permanent separation from God.

Some who wander away from the truth were never under its power. They professed faith in Christ, but they never experienced the power of the gospel in their lives. Their return is a real conversion to Christ. Although they previously professed to know Christ, they were deceived.

Others who wander are real Christians who have been enticed by Satan. Their return to Christ helps them to avoid the ruin and destruction of a life of disobedience. They enjoy God's blessing in their soul. Since James has described the person who wanders as one of you, he has pictured him as a professing Christian who has wandered from the truth. When the professing Christian returns to commitment to Christ, he avoids the spiritual ruin that would otherwise fall upon him.

Second, the wanderer is forgiven a multitude of sins. These are the sins of the person who returns. There is no thought here suggesting a way of atonement besides believing in Christ. People who successfully encourage straying believers back to commitment to Christ obey God and lead the sinner to forgiveness. Such encouragers do not atone for their own sins by their actions.

The text does not describe how a Christian should go about the work of restoring a wanderer. Certainly we would expect the starting point to be prayer for the repentance of wanderers and a ministry of love in supporting and encouraging them (John 13:34-35).