

Search & Rescue
James 5:19-20
ABC 10/6/19

This spring, the sheriff called it nothing short of a miracle. Leia & Caroline Carrico had been found in the woods 44 hours after they took a wrong turn & got lost. Over 250 people descended on the remote & heavily wooded area near their home in Humboldt County. Leia, 8, & 5-year-old Caroline were found a little over about 1.5 miles from their home, hunkered down under a huckleberry bush. The girls said they'd been following a game trail when they got lost & decided to stay put. They survived by drinking water from leaves. The search team included law enforcement & military personnel. Using dogs & helicopters to help search the rugged terrain, they found footprints that eventually led to the girls. Describing the danger the girls were in, one official said this: *An 8 & a 5-year-old were by themselves in the woods, in the middle of cougar country, with bears & everything. We were stressed. We were concerned. It was palpable.*¹ William Honsal, Humboldt County Sheriff said, *I'm pleased to report that we're all witnessing a miracle today.*² Thankfully, they were found in time, & a story that could've resulted in tragedy had a happy ending instead. It's easy for any of us to end up on the wrong trail. Sometimes it happens by accident & sometimes we make foolish decisions that lead us to a dangerous place. When we wander off the path, will anyone come after us? If they do, will they get to us in time? James is thinking about these questions as he comes to the end of his little letter to the scattered Christian Jews. & it seems to end abruptly. There are no final words of love, no fond farewells, & no encouraging comments. Instead, he wraps up his letter with a command to each of us. These 2 vs form a fitting conclusion as they express James' primary goal in writing this letter: to confront those in the church who possess a false, dead faith. Let's pay attention to his words because one day we may find ourselves off the trail & we'll need someone to come for us. Or our Christian friends may wander away. Will we care enough to go after them? **13-20 PRAY**

¹ www.northcoastjournal.com/humboldt/witnessing-a-miracle-the-story-of-two-young-sisters-lost-in-the-woods-and-the-frantic-search-to-find-them/

² www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Caroline-Leia-Carrico-missing-girls-found-Humboldt-13659543.php#item-85307-tbla-5

It's always an anxious moment, especially for families & friends, when someone is reported missing in the wilderness. Search & rescue teams spring into action. We wait expectantly for any word of locating the missing person. It's a moment of great joy if they're found alive & well, but a time of great sorrow when they're not. If you're a Christian, you're a member of God's search & rescue team. But even though every believer is on the team, many never respond to the call to go out & look for the lost. Can you imagine being lost in the woods, but no one came looking for you? When you finally stagger out to civilization, you ask why no one came looking. One member of the search & rescue team says, *It was really cold & stormy, & there was a good show on TV. So I just prayed for you to be OK.* Another says, *I wanted to be sensitive to your feelings. I thought you might be embarrassed if we came looking.* Another says, *I wasn't sure you were really lost. It would be judgmental to imply you actually were lost. Besides, it would be arrogant of me to say that I'm not lost. After all, we all have our own paths on the journey.* That's not the kind of search & rescue team I'd want if I were lost! What does James tell us? **19-20**

I admit, what James tells us to do here is one of the most difficult things God asks us to do. As believers, we're responsible to help rescue straying sinners & return them to the truth. It's often about as pleasant as trying to help a wounded dog; you're probably going to get bit no matter how gently you try to help. When you're successful, it's a moment of great joy. But even the hope of success doesn't make the task any easier. But since you're on God's search & rescue team, you need to learn how to do the job. Note 3 things:

1. The Problem: Straying from the Truth. Is James talking about backsliding believers or about those who don't truly know Christ? The 1st part of vs 19 seems to indicate James is talking about believers, **my brethren, if any among you strays...** But when vs 20 talks about saving his soul from death, it sounds like saving a soul from hell. Some assume James is talking only about believers. Since believers cannot lose their salvation, they interpret vs 20 as saving the person from physical death as God's discipline for sin. The other approach, which I believe to be correct, is to say that James is writing to the church, but he knows there are some in the church that have made professions of faith, but aren't genuinely saved. This fits with the overall theme of James, which is to emphasize

that true saving faith isn't just to make a decision or to say, *I believe in Jesus*. True saving faith results in good works (Eph 2:8-10). In Js 1:22, he says, **prove yourselves to be doers of the word, & not merely hearers who delude themselves**. In 2:14, he asks rhetorically, **What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?** & the answer, of course, is no. He states, **Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself** (2:17; cf 2:26). The biblical doctrine of eternal security isn't that a person prays to accept Jesus into his heart & he'll never lose his salvation. It's not that a person makes a decision to receive Christ & he can instantly be assured he's going to heaven, no matter how he lives after that. The true biblical doctrine is that genuine salvation isn't primarily a human decision, but is God changing the sinner's heart, raising him from spiritual death to spiritual life & giving him faith to believe. This new life that God imparts results in a new way of living. Rather than hating God, the newborn Christian will love God & desire to please Him. Rather than living for his own selfish pleasure, he'll yield to Jesus as Lord & seek to live for His glory. This isn't sinless perfection, but about the overall direction which comes from a new heart & new life. We see this clearly in 1 Jn 3:7-9:

Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; & he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

When John says, **he cannot sin**, he doesn't mean it's impossible for a believer to sin. He isn't contradicting himself in 1 Jn 1:8, where he said, **If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves & the truth is not in us**. Believers do sin. The difference is when a believer sins he's grieved & troubled. He can't go on in sin. God's Spirit convicts him & he knows he's displeased his Lord. So the believer who sins repents & turns back to the Lord. He strives daily against sin & sets up safeguards to prevent falling into sin again. The overall direction of his life is to grow in holiness & to bear fruit for God.

We see this illustrated in Jesus' parable of the sower (Mt 13:3-9, 18-23; Mk 4:3-9, 13-20; Lk 8:5-8, 10-15) where the gospel is sown on 4 kinds of hearts. 1st, there's the hard heart (Lk 8:5, 12). The fields in Israel were divided by footpaths which became hard as rock from the combination of

occasional moisture, the constant pounding of feet, & the kiln-like effect of the blazing sun. When the farmer (God the Holy Spirit) sows the seed (God's Word) on the path (hard human hearts), it's trampled on & the birds eat it up, which means, as Jesus explained, **the devil comes & takes away the word from their hearts, so that they will not believe & be saved** (12). Satan's vulturous beak snatches the precious seed of the gospel from hardened hearts before it germinates.

2nd, there's the shallow heart (6, 13). Palestine is covered with bedrock & a thin coating of soil, which enhances the sprouting of new seed because the bedrock is quickly warmed by the sun & brings speedy germination. But the fresh sprouts also quickly die because the shallow soil doesn't allow an adequate root system. Jesus makes the application clear: **Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; & these have no firm root; they believe for a while, & in time of temptation fall away** (13). Nothing is greener than a new sprout. In fact, it may even appear more healthy than the other seed. The problem with shallowness is that **they have no firm root so in time of temptation fall away**. This is especially common today because so much theology is man-centered. Christ is preached with the emphasis on what He can do for us, & receiving Him is viewed as doing Him a favor. This shallow theology corrupts the doctrine of sin & minimizes the holiness of God, producing bogus converts. Jesus' explanation of the shallow heart is a warning to all of us to honestly reflect on the reality of our conversion. Has the Word truly taken root? Are we growing? Or was there a brief spurt & then nothing?

The 3rd kind of heart is the infested heart (7, 14). Some of the seed of God's Word falls on thorn-infested soil which strangles the promising beginnings of new life. Christ says, **The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, & as they go on their way they are choked with worries & riches & pleasures of this life, & bring no fruit to maturity** (14). The trio of murderers, **worries ... riches ... pleasures**, all strangle the seed. The proof is that they do not mature. In failing to mature, they produce no fruit. If there is no fruit in our lives, & if our focus is on material possessions, we're probably not Christians. We've fooled others &, even more tragically, fooled ourselves.

Finally, there's the fertile heart (8, 15). Jesus says of it, **Other seed fell into the good soil, & grew up, & produced a crop a hundred times as great (8), & then explains, But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest & good heart, & hold it fast, & bear fruit with perseverance (15).** True believers bear fruit! Our Lord adds in Matthew's account that the yield is **a 100, 60 or 30 times what was sown (13:23).** This is 1st an inward fruit, the fruit of the Spirit: **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22-23).** These inner fruits come into full bloom, then produce the outward fruit which James emphasizes.

The significance of the 4 hearts is that all of them exist in the mystery of the visible church! The visible church has 3 kinds of unregenerate hearts within it: the hard heart, the shallow heart, & the infested heart. Those with regenerate hearts, true Christians, are the fertile, fruitful hearts. To be sure, there are degrees of fruitfulness & all believing hearts at times wrestle with hardness, shallowness, & infestation, but God's Word is rooted deeply, & there's ongoing fruit.

We must bring Christ's perspective to his brother James' exhortation about the danger of wandering off with which he closes his letter. James has been concerned that people within the visible church have true faith. Faith, according to James, produces works which affect how one spends his money, how he relates to the poor, to the world, & so much more. Faith shows itself in the use of the whole body, especially the tongue. Aberrations in any of these areas may indicate a false faith & the danger of apostasy. His call to keep our brothers & sisters on track is a fitting conclusion to his great letter.

Back in our text James is referring to the straying one who may be a rocky soil *believer* or a thorny soil *believer*. Neither type is truly saved because they don't bring forth the fruit of saving faith. In James' terms, their faith is a dead faith. Or he may be a true believer who has fallen into sin. How do we know which group the person is in? We can't for sure but we have some indication by his response to our efforts to restore him to the truth. If he walks away from the Lord & goes on in sin, most likely he isn't truly saved. If he repents & comes back to the Lord, his faith is genuine. By helping him to turn back & persevere in faith & obedience, you have saved **his soul from death &**

covered a **multitude of sins** (more on that in a moment). Note one other thing in vs 19. James says this person has strayed **from the truth**. In vs 20, he mentions turning him from **the error of his way**. To stray **from the truth** implies departing from the truth of the gospel or some core Christian doctrine. **The error of his way** indicates sinful behavior. The point is that doctrinal error & sin are often intertwined. The Jewish mind never separated the intellectual from the behavioral or the doctrinal from the moral. Truth is something people live out. Sometimes a person embraces false doctrine because he's fallen into serious sin & needs to deny sound doctrine to justify his sin. At other times, the person embraces some serious doctrinal error & before long his false doctrine opens the door for him to embrace sin. James is acknowledging that professing Christians can stray from the truth, both doctrinally & morally. I've known people who drifted away from the faith, but I've never known anyone who did it intentionally. It's hard to imagine someone waking up & saying, *Today I'm going to ruin my life*. Perhaps there are people like that, but those folks aren't in view here. James is thinking about those who once fellowshiped with us around the Lord's Table, but something happened, & now they're gone. Not only are they not in our church; they're not in anyone's church. They've wandered off the path of Christian fellowship. Don't automatically think this vs doesn't apply to you. Our worst mistake would be reading this text & saying, *Oh, I know who James is talking about*. Don't be so sure. Before you point your finger, look in the mirror. He might be talking about you.

2. The Responsibility: Search & Rescue. James addresses the church as **my brethren** & is general when he says, **& one turns him back**. Who is qualified to do this? James uses 2 very general terms to describe those who wander away & those who bring them back. He says, **If anyone strays ... & someone brings them back**. Anyone can stray, & anyone can bring the stray back home. He doesn't limit this to the pastor or the elders. The ministry of search-&-rescue belongs to the whole body of Christ. There are some people the pastor can't reach. The elders can't rescue everyone. No, this is a job for every believer. If you belong to Jesus, you're a member of God's search-&-rescue team. We must go to them because they've gotten lost & followed the wrong trail, & they won't find their way back on their own. In Gal 6:1, Paul puts it this way, **Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any**

trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. To be **spiritual** means to be spiritually mature, to be walking in the Spirit & producing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). This means if you know of someone who is straying from the truth, you must go to him to help turn him back to the Lord. If you feel inadequate, join the club. But God & His Spirit are always more than adequate. To ignore someone who's straying is like a member of the search & rescue team sitting at home watching TV while someone's lost in the woods. It's certainly not the right thing to do. Searching is required because professing believers who fall into sin seldom stay with the flock. We must go after them. If you know of someone who made a profession of faith, but who's disappeared, you need to go looking & find out what's going on. Rescue is required because the enemy confuses their sense of direction. Or they're ashamed at what they've done & need to be assured of God's forgiveness if they'll repent & confess their sins. They also need instruction on how not to stray again so they don't repeat the process. They need someone who knows God & the way back, to teach them God's ways to avoid & resist sin. & you are that person.

Before we move on, we ought to ask ourselves how we respond when we see a brother or sister wandering away from the truth. Are we glad? Do we gloat? Or do we care enough to get involved? Perhaps the real danger is being so busy that we don't even see our brother or sister wandering away. One day we turn around, & they are nowhere to be found. What happened? No one seems to know. We shrug & go back to our business. If you don't know who is **among you**, how can you apply vs 19? You have a responsibility to those who've identified themselves as sheep in the flock of ABC, members of the same family you are in, to be involved in a search & rescue team for them when they go astray, & to try & help them before they go astray. But in our day, when people just attend a service & go home, never committing by membership & involvement, it becomes more difficult to know who really considers themselves a part of the church family among us, who truly wants to be shepherded. One writer said it this way:

They need to be turned back to the Lord. & James urges their fellow-Christians to get in their way, head them off & turn them back. Many of us must admit that we have not thought much about this. When we see a professing Christian straying, we have a tendency to excuse ourselves from responsibility by saying, 'It's not my business.' Or we think that our responsibility begins & ends

with praying ... James would certainly have us to pray for them. But he wants us also to confront them lovingly with their straying & tenderly call them back to the Lord ... let us not stand idly by when we see a straying brother or sister³

3. The Goal It's our goal to see the sinner restored to the truth & his soul saved from death & have their sins covered by the cross of Jesus. The work of search & rescue is difficult & sometimes disheartening. It doesn't always turn out the way you'd hope. But when you find a straying sinner & get him back from the path of destruction, it brings great joy. James mentions 3 goals:

A. Turns 19

The sinner has strayed from the truth. Our job is to restore him to it. James' words imply there is such a thing as absolute spiritual truth. When a person strays from it, you can know it. The truth isn't a subjective feeling, but an objective reality. James is referring especially to the truth of the gospel. He uses the word **truth** that way in 1:18 where he says, **In the exercise of His will, He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.** He uses **truth** one other time in 3:14. **But if you have bitter jealousy & selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant & so lie against the truth.** For James, **truth** isn't just doctrinal knowledge, but also godly living. Our culture rejects the idea of absolute truth, especially in the spiritual realm. What is true for you is fine for you, but it's not true for me unless I happen to like it. It would be judgmental & arrogant for me to say you're wrong & I'm right. Rather, you can be right & I can be right, even though we hold to opposing beliefs, because spiritual truth has been redefined as subjective experience or preference, not as objective reality. But the Bible asserts there is absolute spiritual truth that saves the soul & absolute error that damns it. Paul told the Galatians if they believed in a different gospel than the one he preached to them, they were damned (Gal 1:6-9; cf 2 Cor 11:3-4). In 2 Thes 2:10, Paul mentions **those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.** The truth isn't a subjective opinion or preference. It's something objective that must be believed if you're to be saved! The essential truth is the gospel, that we are saved solely by God's grace through faith in Christ, apart from our good works, that saving faith results in good works (Eph 2:8-10).

³ Roger Ellsworth, *Opening Up James*, pp 166–167

B. Save his soul from death. Some believe this refers to a believer whose sin leads to physical death. While it's true God may take the life of a sinning believer (1 Cor 11:30; 1 Jn 5:16), that isn't the meaning here because God doesn't take the physical life of every sinning believer. James is talking about saving a soul from spiritual death. The only other time James uses **death**, he says, **when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death** (1:15). The natural course of unchecked sin ends in spiritual separation from God. Elsewhere, James uses the word **save** 3x to refer to spiritual salvation (1:21; 2:14; 4:12). Only once does it seem to refer to physical healing (5:15). If a person who claims to know Jesus turns toward sin & continues on that path, he may not be a true believer. In the terms of 1 Jn 3, he's revealing by his practice he isn't born of God. If God uses you to help him repent & turn to the Lord, then you've saved his soul from a path that would have led to spiritual death—eternal separation from God. To rescue someone from a burning building is a great thing. To rescue someone from eternal burning is far greater. Is it truly the rescuer who saves the wandering soul from death? No, only God can do that but He purposes to use us in His work.

C. Cover a multitude of sins. James here alludes to Prov 10:12, **Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions.** Peter also cites that vs, **Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins** (1 Pt 4:8). Both of those texts refer to not broadcasting the sins of others & to forgiving one another. But James seems to express the meaning that's given in Ps 32:1, **How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!** When a sinner turns to the Lord, God forgives all his sins. If a professing believer habitually persists in sin, he shouldn't be assured he's eternally secure. The Bible never gives that comfort to an unrepentant person. The image of covering sin looks back to the Day of Atonement, which James' Jewish readers would certainly understand. To atone means to cover so that the sins are gone forever. Where sin is covered, all guilt is gone. I've talked to people who thought their sin was so horrible that God couldn't forgive it. In those moments when guilt overwhelms us, we must decide what we believe about Jesus & His death on the cross. When he cried out, **It is finished** (Jn 19:30), did He mean it? Is His blood enough to cover all your sins? James may have a secondary meaning here as well. By leading a sinner to repentance, you help cover his past or potential future sins from public view.

James also implies that when you help restore a sinner to God, you must be careful not to reveal his sins any farther than is necessary for restoration.

If you're a Christian, you're on God's search & rescue team. Here are your instructions:

#1 – Who should go & find the wandering one? If you know them, you're it! Truth is most often received through loving relationships. You have relationships with each other. At least you should! Go after those who wander. It's your job just as much as it is mine.

#2 – Get the facts. Don't go on hearsay or gossip. If someone tells you of someone else in sin, ask them, *Have you personally checked out the facts?* Then tell the one telling you not to talk to anyone else, but to go to the sinning person. If you're the one to go, don't begin with accusations. Instead, ask questions to determine the truth. Does the issue involve a major doctrine or opinion on a minor issue? Is it a matter of immaturity or spiritual weakness, where you need to help him grow, or is he defiantly walking away from God (1 Thes 5:14)?

#3 – Check your own heart. There's no room for being judgmental. **Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall** (1 Cor 10:12). Your motive should be to restore the straying one, not to put him in his place or to prove you're right & he's wrong. Make sure you're under the control of the Holy Spirit & displaying the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:16, 22-23; 6:1). The word **restore** in Gal 6:1 was used of mending torn nets & of setting broken bones so they'd heal. Think of how gently you'd want a doctor to do that with you & then be that gentle in dealing with a person straying from the truth.

#4 – Pray. Don't attempt to restore a straying person before you pray for him & for yourself (Jas 5:16-18). Prayer puts you in the right place before God, dependent on His grace. Only then are you able to minister to the wandering. You can't properly talk to men about God until you've talked to God about men. Pray for the right time, opening, words, & reception.

#5 – Make sure that love for God & love for your brother are your motives for going. You should desire to please God & show genuine concern for your erring brother.

#6 – Go directly to the person. Don't go behind his back & try to campaign for your point of view or try to convince others to do what God is calling you to do. Go alone at 1st. If he listens, you've

won your brother. If he refuses to listen, take 2 or 3 others. Eventually, it may need to be told to the church (Mt 18:15-17).

#7 – Think through in advance the proper approach & wording. Study how Nathan confronted David for starters (2 Sam 12:1-14). Be prepared for the one in sin to accuse you of some shortcoming, & do not get into a verbal war. Just stick to the issue. If you're sitting in your easy chair by the fire & you know of a brother or sister who's lost in the storm, God asks you to inconvenience yourself. Get up, put on your coat, & go out into the storm & work to rescue your brother. It may not be fun, but it's an expression of genuine love & faith in action. That's what James is all about!

Let's wrap up by thinking about the 2 little girls lost in the woods for 44 hours. The rescue team spent 100s of hours looking for them. They searched in all directions, followed every clue, & never gave up. What the sheriff called a miracle was the result of a vast number of people working together, side-by-side, all with the same goal in mind: to find those girls & bring them back alive. They had no guarantee. They didn't know if they'd find them. They didn't know their condition if they found them. The story could have had a different ending. But hundreds of people went out searching & never gave up. They believed it was worth the time, money, & effort. In the end, they were rewarded when they found those girls safe & sound. What the rescue workers did for those girls, we must do for each other. We must never say, *It doesn't matter* or *someone else will do it* or *they deserve what they get*. If we love those who go astray, we must go after them. There are no guarantees about how they'll respond, but if we don't go, how will they ever find their way back to the Lord? We come again & again to moments of decision where we must decide whether to get personally involved. **Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends** (Jn 15:13). That's what Jesus did when He died on the cross, paying the price for our sins, taking the death we should have died, turning away God's wrath, setting us free, & giving us eternal life. There is no greater love than this. If Jesus left heaven for us, can we not leave our comfort zone to reach out to those who have gone astray? James concludes with this because this is exactly what he's tried to do throughout this letter: confront those who've wandered from a living faith,

endeavoring to save their souls be demanding they not only hear the Word, but do it, because a living faith will have proof. If you haven't turned from your sins, the error of your ways, may this be the day your soul is saved from hell & the multitude of your sins covered by Jesus. Turn from your sins, trust Him as Lord. Renounce all that you are & have done as ugly & wretched & embrace all that Christ is & has done for you as beautiful & lovely, a gift of God's grace. I'm sure all of us who are Christians long to be used of God to bring others to Christ. But here we're reminded that bringing back the wanderer is work. We are ambassadors for Jesus & therefore should be seeking to turn people from their sin to Jesus. We're to persistently carry out this work whether those sinners are inside or outside the church so that they may live their lives according to God's truth.

PRAY

As we've seen, we're to find those who are straying & strive to bring them back. The example we have for this is, of course, God Himself. Jesus tells us He came to what? **To seek & to save that which was lost** (Lk 19:10). How did He do that? You know the answer. He was born as a baby & lived a sinless life. He was fully human & fully God. He left the comforts & praise of heaven to come to a sin-sick earth. While we were wandering far from Him, He came to **seek & to save us. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us** (Rom 5:8). That is the ultimate search & rescue mission & He did it for you. As we come to the communion table we remember His loving sacrifice for us.

PRAY

The bread is a symbol of His body that was wounded for our transgression, bruised for our iniquity, & smitten of God & afflicted. When we take & eat this bread, we remember that by His stripes we are healed. Jesus tells us, **This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me** (Lk 22:19).

The cup is symbol reminding us that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin. It's a reminder that eternal life is only found in the bloody death of God's perfect Lamb. We remember that He died the death we should have died as the punishment for our sin. **This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood** (Lk 22:20). Let's remember Him as we drink.