

Putting Your Faith to Work

James 5: 19-20

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While we were having dinner the other day my wife, Sherry, asked me, "Since we have finished with the book of James, what will you be preaching on this coming Sunday?" I replied, "Well, we're not quite finished yet. There's one last sermon that I need to preach on the last two verses in chapter five." In response, guess what Sherry said, "NUTS!!" Perhaps you're thinking the same thing, "Nuts. When will we ever finish these sermons on the book of James? Seems like this sermon series has been going on forever." If those have been your sentiments, and you've grown a bit weary of brother James, let me assure you. We're done! Today is the very last sermon on the book of James. Today, I promise that we will conclude our study of this New Testament letter.

Here's why. The book of James is a down to earth workingman's handbook on how to live the Christian way of life. It's not filled with a lot of flowery statements or ivory tower theological thinking. At times it can be quite confrontational. In fact, it reminds me of one of my supervisors when I was a student chaplain at Baptist Hospital in Winston Salem, North Carolina. My supervisor didn't cut his students any slack. He had high expectations and at times he was brutally honest in his evaluations. On one occasion he invited me into his office and said, "Ok Parker. What's it going to be? Do your work and fulfill your assignments, or ship out? Think it over and tell me your decision tomorrow morning." I thought it over and decided it was time to go to work.

I suspect that's what James had in mind when he wrote those last two verses at the end of his letter. Like everything else he had written, these last two verses were direct and to the point. They were quite different from the way that Paul concluded his letters, sending greetings to various individuals and sharing personal prayer requests. Nevertheless, these last two verses were a concluding summary of everything that James wanted to say to his fellow believers. He was saying to them, "I've given you a whole list of instructions and guidance on how to live the Christian way of life successfully. I've told you to persevere during adversity, to control your wayward tongues, to be doers of the word and not hearers only, to not let wealth become an idol, to refrain from being boastful and finally to make sure that you are a part of a singing, healing and praying church. Now, go out there into the world and put into practice what you have learned." In other words I want you to start **PUTTING YOUR FAITH TO WORK!**

With that in mind, let's take a look at how James concluded his letter, because what he had to say applies to our lives just as surely as it applied to the lives of those who first read it nearly two thousand years ago. Here's the first thing that he wants to say to them and to us, "Do not wander from the truth." I am reminded of what I learned years ago about sheep. They can wander off. They don't intend to. It just sort of happens. They have their heads down nibbling grass along a hillside and when they look up, the rest of the flock has moved on and they don't know where they are. They're out of touch with the rest of the sheep and frequently an easy prey for those who would do them harm. Because as the Scriptures tell us, we are like sheep, the same thing can happen to us. Indeed, that is what happened during the Covid pandemic. We became isolated, cut off from our fellow believers, hunkered down in our homes and when it was finally over, we had lost touch with one another and sometimes even with God. Before the pandemic 75 percent of Americans said that they attended church at least once a month. Afterwards the percentage had declined to 68 percent, a seven percent decline.

As James points out, wandering away is not just about church attendance. He's talking about wandering away from the truth. Now what does that mean? Is he talking about wandering away from the truth of the Gospel, the message of God's love revealed in the Scriptures? Certainly and today there are an increasing number of people who have wandered away from the truth of God's Word. They no longer believe that the Scriptures are inspired and they have rejected the doctrines and beliefs which are at the very heart of Christianity. In fact, the fastest growing segment of religious life in America today are the "religiously unaffiliated," otherwise known as the "NONES." In the past ten years, 2013 to 2023, their ranks have grown from 21 percent to 26 percent. Wandering away from doctrinal and scriptural truth has always been a problem for God's people down through the centuries, but to be perfectly honest, it's now at an all-time high.

However, even though preserving doctrinal truth is vitally important, that's not what James was talking about here. True to everything else that he said in his letter, James was talking about wandering away from the Christian way of life, failing to practice the moral and ethical teachings of Christ. His entire letter had been devoted to that theme. It wasn't just believing the truth, but putting that truth into practice that was all important. And to be perfectly honest it still is. We can intellectually understand and give mental assent to all of the teachings in the Scriptures, but if we don't put them into practice what good are they? Furthermore, Christians who don't practice their faith are a hindrance to the work of God's kingdom. Years ago I came across this quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, the man who secured the independence of India through peaceful non-violence. He said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your

Christ.” One of the primary reasons for people rejecting Christianity is the example, or should I say, the lack of a good example by God’s people. When we are not true to our beliefs in the way we live and treat others, we have failed and sometimes have failed miserably at putting our faith into practice.

This brings me to this concluding observation. James says, “Whoever turns one sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins” (James 5:20). In other words, we have an obligation to care for one another and especially so when a fellow Christian is headed in the wrong direction. Several years ago Paul and Nancy Van Dyke did a masterful job compiling our church’s history and presenting it to us in a 246 page book. It described the life of our church from its origins to the present day. Among a number of things that were presented was the fact that the church took seriously what James had to say in these last two verses. When in 1870 a member, in fact an elder in the church, was cited for “rumors and reports prejudicial to Christian character,” the leaders of the church confronted him about these accusations. It was later reported that “his remorse and promise of repentance avoided censure.” The purpose of church discipline was not to punish, but rather to restore a wayward fellow believer.

Church discipline for the most part has gone by the wayside in most churches. It’s seen as harsh and mean spirited, but is it really? Have we come to the point that we have taken the position that everyone can believe and do as they wish, even if it brings harm upon themselves and others? Looking back over my ministry, there are a number of people that I wish I had done more to bring them back into the truth of a Christian way of life. One of them was a young man who died of a drug overdose.

Death, whether physical or spiritual, is a terrible consequence of wandering away from the truth of how God desires for us to live with Him and with one another. For that reason, James reminds us that undertaking such endeavors covers a “multitude of sins.” Peter says the same thing in the first letter that he wrote to fellow Christians, “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). When we love another person so much that we help that individual to find his or her way back to God, then we have become champions in the sin removal business. God has wiped the slate clean in the life of the repentant sinner and who knows, He may have removed a few indiscretions from our own lives as well.

So start putting your faith to work each and every day for yourself and for others. Everyone will be a whole lot happier and when you pick up the book of James to remind yourself as to how we should live the Christian way of life, you won’t have to say, “NUTS.”