

JAMES 5:19, 20

A RESPONSIBILITY WE DARE NOT NEGLECT

“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 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.”¹

No sheep ever decided to get lost; but sheep do nevertheless become lost. No Christian ever came into the Faith with a determination to stray; but Christians do stray. No child of God ever began to follow the Saviour with the desire to turn aside after false teachers; but children of the Living God are led astray by false teachers. Worse still, believers can and do deceive themselves, straying into error and deserting the path of righteousness.

James concludes his letter to early Christians with a blunt statement emphasising our shared responsibility for the welfare of all the sheep. His statement flies in the face of contemporary ecclesiology, and undoubtedly insults the teaching of many church experts. However, we take our instruction and draw our faith from the Word of God, and not from the experts. Therefore, we are compelled to apply the instruction James gives us to our own life as a community of faith.

PRONE TO WANDER — “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth...” The hymn writer has spoken a great truth that applies to each of us when he wrote:

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love.²

A propensity for straying marks sheep—it is the reason they require a shepherd, often accompanied by a guard dog. And a proclivity for wandering marks the people of God. The Old Testament at times appears to be one dismal account of the people of God turning from pursuing hard after the Living God to following their own desires.

Consider, for instance, one of the Psalms of Asaph.

“Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth!
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us.
We will not hide them from their children,
but tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” Robert Robinson

“He established a testimony in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers
to teach to their children,
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;
and that they should not be like their fathers,
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,
whose spirit was not faithful to God.”

[PSALM 78:1-8]

That Psalm continues, adding incident to incident each pointing to the bent for rebellion that marked God’s chosen people. Despite delivering them repeatedly, they “sinned still more against Him” [verse 17a], rebelled against the Most High [verse 17b], “tested God in their heart” [verse 18] and “spoke against God” [verse 19]. Later, the author says that “despite His wonders, they did not believe” [verse 32b]. In summation, “they tested God again and again” [verse 41a]. A minority of the people that had been delivered from Egypt grumbled against Moses and Aaron [see EXODUS 15:24], and their complaining led to widespread dissent [EXODUS 16:2] that brought the newly delivered people to the brink of destruction [see NUMBERS 11:1 ff.; 14:1 ff., 28 ff.].

It is a dark history, and one which Stephen uses to rebuke religious leaders in Israel when he was compelled to offer a defence of his service before the Saviour. “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it” [ACTS 7:51-53].

Tragically, that propensity to stray has not been eradicated from God’s people in this age. Each of us is disposed to turn aside to our own way, imagining that we know what is best. I believe that the tendency is exaggerated among us who live in North America. We have developed a culture marked by rugged individualism, in which we are trained from infancy to stand alone against the ravages of life. Our heroes are stalwart individuals who require nothing of others and who stand firm against every form of evil. To a degree, this reflects a healthy sense of responsibility for oneself; however, it does not meet the biblical criteria for life in the Body. Here, within the Body of Christ, we bear responsibility for one another.

James is not speaking of evangelism at this point. Tragically, preachers have frequently used this passage as a starting point for insisting that on evangelistic efforts. Look at what James says, however. He is speaking to the community of faith—to the local congregation. He says, “If anyone among you,” indicating that his focus is the assembly that he identified as the “synagogue” [JAMES 2:2, *sunagōgē*, here translated “assembly”] and as the “church” [JAMES 5:14]. This shared responsibility is central to what James is saying at the conclusion of this letter, and we will return to this matter shortly. However, for the moment, we need to remind ourselves of who we are and of our propensity to stray from the truth.

The Word of God warns us against our bent to evil. The Apostle was merciless on himself, and despite the modern emphasis upon feeling good about ourselves and building up our self-esteem, he saw himself as sinful. “What I don’t understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can’t be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God’s command is necessary.

“But I need something *more*! For if I know the law but still can’t keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don’t have what it takes. I can will it, but I can’t *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don’t *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don’t result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

“It happens so regularly that it’s predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God’s commands, but it’s pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge” [ROMANS 7:15-23].³

Listen to this iteration of the apostolic conclusion with the cry of a truly convicted man. “I have learned this rule: When I want to do good, evil is there with me. In my mind, I am happy with God’s law. But I see another law working in my body, which makes war against the law that my mind accepts. That other law working in my body is the law of sin, and it makes me its prisoner. What a miserable man I am! Who will save me from this body that brings me death” [ROMANS 7:21-24]?⁴

If the Apostle struggled without great success against the tendency of his own sinful nature, then we should not be surprised at his conclusion concerning all mankind—“all, Jews and Greeks, are under sin” [ROMANS 3:9]. Now, it is one thing to gravely nod our heads and agree that all are sinners, but it is quite another thing to confess that our finest decisions are tainted with sin. It is a difficult thing to admit that our minds are contaminated and that we are incapable of acting with heavenly wisdom or speaking with righteous intent all the time.

There is a tendency to imagine that we will just go it alone, that we will use the church for our own purposes and then move on with our lives. We convince ourselves that we are responsible for ourselves, and no one else is responsible for our decision, except when we get in over our head, in which case the government can bail us out, or the pastor can come pray for us since we pay him to do that. Such thinking is quite commonplace among modern Christians, but it was equally common in the ancient world.

Throughout the Proverbs are multiple warnings against going it alone.

“There is a way that seems right to a man,
but its end is the way of death.”

[PROVERBS 14:12]

This proverb, sufficiently important that it is repeated [PROVERBS 16:25], assumes that each of us is prone to follow a path of our own making, believing that we know what is right without any interference from God. It cautions against choosing our paths without godly consultation. However, we are warned that this choice leads to death—both death for ourselves and death for those who look to us from guidance and leadership. Here are a few other proverbs in the same vein that caution against a “lone ranger” mentality.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language** (NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO 2002)

⁴ The Everyday Bible: New Century Version (Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN 2005)

“Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.”

[PROVERBS 3:7]

“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes,
but a wise man listens to advice.”

[PROVERBS 12:15]

“All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes,
but the LORD weighs the spirit.”

[PROVERBS 16:2]

“Every way of a man is right in his own eyes,
but the LORD weighs the heart.”

[PROVERBS 21:2]

“Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes?
There is more hope for a fool than for him.”

[PROVERBS 26:12]

Repeatedly, the Wise Man cautions against what he identifies as doing what is wise in our own eyes or what is right in our own eyes. In other words, the Wise Man warns against attempting to go it alone without benefit of counsel from the wise. The Word of God cautions, and experience compels full agreement, that the people of God are susceptible to pursuing that way against which Solomon warned—the way that leads to death. It is precisely because we are prone to follow our own way to our own destruction that Solomon repeatedly warns us.

Solomon warned against that way because it does seem right! The way looks easier. It requires less thought. It makes people feel good as they begin strolling down the path. Or worse yet, believers are so focused on their own wants that they fail to think through the consequences. None of us can claim immunity from this dreadful malady, because we have been tempted to follow our own desires at one time or another, if we haven’t actually pursued our own interests.

SIN’S PENALTY — “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death.” Here is the truly dismaying aspect of walking our own path—it leads to death. James says that when one of our own is brought back from wandering from the truth, we save that individual from death.

The Bible is unequivocal in declaring that “the wages of sin is death” [ROMANS 6:23a]. This is but an iteration of the warning provided through Ezekiel: “the soul who sins shall die” [EZEKIEL 18:4]. This grim truth is delivered in the context that each individual is responsible for himself or herself. “The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son,” declares the Lord. God continues His warning by noting, “The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” [EZEKIEL 18:20]. In other words, we are responsible for ourselves; we can blame no one except ourselves if we sin and bring divine judgement upon ourselves.

It matters not whether we are speaking of an individual, or whether we are speaking of a group—sin leads to death as surely as smoke ascends from a fire. Nations die because of sin. Communities die because of sin. Churches die because of sin. People die because of sin. Sin is the cause of death, as God asserts through the Apostle in the letter to Roman Christians: “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin” [**ROMANS 5:12**]. This truth was explored earlier in this letter when James wrote, “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” [**JAMES 1:14, 15**].

We Christians are quick to testify that those who are sinners before God shall die. However, James compels us to face the fact that we who are redeemed, who are part of the Family of God, are likewise susceptible to death when we choose to resist the Spirit of God, acting in a rebellious manner to pursue our own personal interests at the expense of the Body. Throughout the letter we are just completing, James has warned of the corrosive effect of errant teaching and errant practise tolerated among the people of God. Generalising, the spirit against which James has inveighed repeatedly is an antinomian spirit that exalts the individual at the expense of the Body. In this, he has perfectly described contemporary Christendom.

Perhaps you will recall the warning that the author of the Letter to Hebrew Christians issued. “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Now, carefully mark the following two verses which state an axiom of the Faith. “For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” [**HEBREWS 10:19-27**].

Make no mistake—sin brings death. Many churches have died, passing into the graveyard of history, because the people tolerated sin in their midst and refused to lovingly hold one another accountable to the Word. In the same manner, Christians have died—and undoubtedly other Christians will yet die—because they have refused the correction of the Master whom they profess to follow. God loves His people too much to ignore their wanton pursuit of their own desires. Because He loves us, God will plead with us through His Word and through His people and by His Spirit. If we heed Him, we will find full restoration and blessing. If we ignore Him, there remains only this warning, “Prepare to meet your God” [**AMOS 4:12**].

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY — “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 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.” Evangelism is a great endeavour, and one which should mark the life of each congregation. However, that is not James’ emphasis at this point. He is insisting that the congregation must function as a body. Undoubtedly, it will prove valuable to establish that James is addressing the entire membership of the congregation. In fact, he addresses them as “My brothers.” He is not speaking to those who are outside the Faith, but rather those who have made an open commitment to one another.

The people whom James has confronted through this letter have arrogated to themselves the right to teach and/or act contrary to the way of Christ. They were Christians, but they had exalted impudence toward the congregation, attempting to use the church for their own purposes. “The church is there is we need it,” appeared to be the attitude manifested, “but we do not need to obey the will of God, submitting ourselves to the Body.” Their attitude extolled the virtues of Roman society while treating the church as a tawdry thing to be used as they deemed best. Therefore, they saw the church as existing for social climbing, as an insurance policy to bail them out of trouble when things went wrong, or as a personal fiefdom to be run as they saw fit.

In urging Christians to seek and to save those who are wandering, James is exalting the nature of the assembly as the Body of Christ. The errors he has catalogued (misuse of the tongue, jealousy, the longing for social status at the expense of fellow believers, contentiousness, and errant teaching) are all markers of a wandering way. What is fascinating, and flies in the face of contemporary ecclesiology, is the fact that the entire Body bears responsibility for reaching out to the strays.

Before exploring the text further, it is necessary to focus on a couple of points that permit a fuller understanding and that might otherwise be overlooked. The first point I want to draw attention to is to note James is speaking of those who are putatively Christians. He acknowledges that these strays have been among the saints—they have been, and are yet, members of the Community of Faith. They hold membership in the church, having openly identified themselves as Christians and, in particular, as members of the assembly.

The second point to emphasise is that the word James uses for “wanders” is the Greek word *planáomai*. It came into our English tongue to describe wandering stars—planets. The word can mean “to lead astray” as well as “to wander,” implying that the straying is not wholly innocent. The wanderer has chosen a deviant path; or if the wanderer has pursued the path accidentally or unconsciously, those teaching and practising this error are certainly conscious that it differs from the truth they know!⁵

Finally, they have wandered from the truth. In James’ estimate, the truth is not only belief, but it is practise. If it were belief only, it would not necessarily be obvious that they had strayed. However, because their lives are now marked by misuse of the tongue, expressing jealousy, using the assembly to move up the social ladder, becoming scrappy with others and even advocating errant doctrine, James would say that regardless of what they espouse their lives no longer reveal commitment to the truth. Thus, as James uses the term, “truth” is closer to what we would call commitment than it is mere doctrinal integrity.

Let’s put together what James has said, then. His concern is the individual who has identified himself or herself as a Christian, openly uniting with the congregation. At some point, this individual has begun to walk an independent path that leads her further and further from loving co-operation as a member of the community of faith. The error may have seemed minor at the first, but at the last it has led to a brutal attitude that demands that the church bend to the will of the wanderer rather than the wanderer submitting to the will of the assembly.

These wandering individuals are heading toward death, and James is instructing the people of God to assume responsibility for the errant ones. I am fascinated by the thought that James does not insist that the elders are responsible to reclaim the strays. In contemporary church life, the elders are expected to chase the strays. In biblical theology, the entire membership bears responsibility for reclaiming the errant members, and each member in particular is urged to accept the obligation to return those who wander to the flock.

⁵ David P. Nystrom, **NIV Application Commentary, New Testament: James** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1997) 319

I recall a church meeting in which a woman implied the church staff was negligent because her neighbours had ceased attending the congregation. These neighbours had reported to her that nobody cared and that they would not ever again attend the church. She ended her tirade on a defiant note that indicated that the church was not getting full value for what the staff was paid. When I asked if she had contacted the staff when she learned that the family was disgruntled, she admitted that she had not. She also admitted that the family had not communicated with any member of the congregation other than herself, and that they had pledged her to silence concerning their disgruntlement. She confessed that she did not know that repeated attempts had been made to speak with the family, but that they were unwilling to speak with me. When I cited several Scriptures demonstrating her responsibility to seek straying members and to keep the staff informed, she denied any responsibility. This particular case was not exceptional; it has become the norm among the churches of our Lord.

Tragically, the people of God in this day appear to fail in their understanding of the collective responsibility that weighs upon each member of an assembly for one another. Contemporary congregations almost always imagine that they hire a pastor to perform the duties of keeping everyone happy, thus absolving the membership of the congregation of all responsibility to seek out straying sheep. Thus, church becomes a location rather than a community. Church becomes what we do rather than who we are. In modern life, church is reduced to a spectator sport for which we pay a minimal admission fee, watch the performers carry out their duties, and rate them by how well they entertain. Brothers, this should not be!

James has endeavoured to establish the idea of the church as a community. James has pressed this point by repeatedly addressing those to whom he writes as “brothers,” thus speaking of shared concerns. More immediately, he has required public confession of sins, as the people demonstrate acceptance of one another in shared weakness and as they also express compassion for one another as they serve one another in love, forgiving and restoring those who repent. Now, he has instructed the congregation as a whole to seek and to save those who are straying.

Since James is one of the earliest books of the New Testament, this is a significant point. James’ understanding of the congregation as community will be loudly and repeatedly echoed by Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. The congregation of the Lord is the Body of Christ. That concept of the living Body of Christ has been almost fully supplanted by the concept of organisation today. Churches expend their energies drafting constitutions, fulfilling governmental mandates to ensure that they represent superficially a democratic ideal, drawing up mission statements, and writing policy statements. What is required is a simple understanding that every member is a servant working together in community to build one another, to encourage one another and to console one another.

It is not the responsibility of the church to provide a professional “prayer” for every turtle race held in the community or to provide professional religious services for those needing to fulfil their religious duties. Each church member is expected to accept responsibility for every other church member; and that is James’ emphasis to the congregations as he draws his brief missive to a conclusion. Each member of the congregation is responsible for the welfare of every other member of the congregation. Paul will clarify that the responsibility includes serving one another through using the gifts of the Spirit to build one another, but James lays the groundwork for this loving concern by insisting that we must accept responsibility to be sensitive to the signs of straying and to hold one another accountable for continuing to walk in the way of the Master. We must reject the idea of a segregation of the church into clergy and laity, into a professional class and an observer class. Such a concept is foreign to the Word of God.

Let me move to a conclusion by reminding you of these shared responsibilities we are assigned when God places us within a congregation. Paul says that the congregation must adopt the understanding that though we are many, we are one body in Christ, “and individually members one of another” [ROMANS 12:5]. Thus, we are to “love one another with brotherly affection” and “outdo one another in showing honour” [ROMANS 12:10]. We are to “live in harmony with one another” [ROMANS 12:16]. We must avoid passing judgement on one another [ROMANS 14:13], but rather “welcome one another” [ROMANS 15:7] and “instruct one another” [ROMANS 15:14]. We are to show consideration for one another [1 CORINTHIANS 11:33], “comfort one another” and “agree with one another” [2 CORINTHIANS 13:11].

We are to “serve one another” [GALATIANS 5:13], even as we “bear one another’s burdens” [GALATIANS 6:2]. Christians are instructed to “be kind to another” and to forgive one another [EPHESIANS 4:32]. Within the community of faith, there is to be an attitude that encourages “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” [EPHESIANS 5:21]. Exhortation is not the purview of the elders alone, for we are taught to “exhort one another every day” [HEBREWS 3:13] and make the effort to “stir up one another to love and good works” [HEBREWS 10:24]. All of these instructions serve to encourage us to serve one another with the gifts God has entrusted to each one of us [cf. 1 PETER 4:10].

When we accept our mutual responsibility to care for one another, to hold one another accountable, and to keep one another walking in the Jesus way, we will save one another from death. There is protection within the fellowship of the community of faith. Elders are assigned the responsibility of watching for predators that may endeavour to destroy the community. They fulfil this responsibility through confronting error and through teaching the truth, carefully providing sound instruction from the Word of God. Each member, including the elders, is to seek to build up one another, to encourage one another and to console one another. Part of this mutual concern for one another is holding one another accountable not to wander off.

The lamb that remains with the flock enjoys nurture and protection. The lamb that strays gains a new name—victim. The enemy of the soul “prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour” [1 PETER 5:8]. There is no question but that he will ensure the death of God’s child, if he is able. When we fulfil our mutual responsibility for one another, we keep one another from death. I trust that none of us will ever be able to say, as did David in the cave,

“Look to the right and see:
there is none who takes notice of me;
no refuge remains to me;
no one cares for my soul.”

[PSALM 142:2]

“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 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.” May God create in us a unified heart, filled with compassion and tenderness to care for one another as we put James’ letter into practise.

Is your heart with us? Is this the place God would have you serve? Come join us that together we can build one another and reveal the love of God to one another. Have you obeyed the Master to confess Him openly through identifying in baptism since you believed? Now is the time to obey the Master; this is the place to follow Him. The congregation stands ready to receive all whom the Master appoints to serve in this place. Does that include you?

Above all else, our call is to any who stand outside the Faith at this time. Know that Jesus, the Son of God, died because of your sin. Know that though He was buried, He was raised from the dead on the third day. He has ascended into heaven, where He is even now seated at the right hand of the Father. His death because of your sin has become the means by which God now offers forgiveness of sin.

The Word of God offers life in the beloved Son of God. This is the promise of God, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That promise is iterated as the Apostle cites the Prophet Joel, saying, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**]. This is the promise of God offered to you as you receive Christ the Lord. Do it today. Do it now. Amen.