

*The unfolding of your words gives light.*

## Faith That Works

### *An Exposition of the Book of James*

<sup>19</sup>My brethren, if any among you strays<sup>a</sup> from the truth<sup>b</sup> and one turns him back<sup>c</sup>, <sup>20</sup>let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way<sup>d</sup> will save his soul from death<sup>e</sup> and will cover a multitude of sins<sup>f</sup>.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> **5:19 My brethren, if any among you strays.** This is a vivid word picture. The word translated “strays” often carries the more active meaning “to deceive.” Its passive picture here is that of a wandering sheep (Matthew 18:12, 13) or of those who “err” because they do not know the Scriptures (Matthew 22:29). James is describing someone who turns away from God’s word (see James’ use of “truth” in 1:18). Just like sheep wander away from the safety provided by their shepherd, so believers often wander from the refuge of God’s word.

People who wander this way are not innocent victims of the alluring greener grass on the other side of the fence. They are high-handed sinners in need of rescue. That is why Isaiah said:

All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. Isaiah 53:6

<sup>b</sup> **5:19 from the truth.** There is absolute truth. When we look at someone who is messed up, we see outward signs of grief and outward consequences of bad decisions. It is easy, then, to think that the best help available will train the hurting person to make better decisions. James shows us here that the real issue is truth, not adapting to life in this world. God’s judgment is not for those who are guilty of breaching codes of social conduct. His wrath is toward lawbreakers and truth-suppressors.

<sup>c</sup> **5:19 and one turns him back.** This is the common New Testament word for “convert.” Jesus used it when he spoke to Peter about his betrayal before it happened. He told Peter, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan asked to have you, that he might sift you as wheat: but I made supplication for thee, that your faith fail not; and do thou, when once thou hast turned again, establish thy brethren.” (Luke 22:31-32).

These last verses of James take us back to the issues in chapter four. There (4:11-12) James taught us why leaders (and others) should not judge others. As James Commentator Daniel Doriani points out (*Reformed Expository Commentary*, p. 203), we are discussing the same type of person and two differing responses in these two passages. Comparing the two texts, when someone is in error we either criticize them or go after them. The responsibility of the leader is to turn sinners around, not judge them.

<sup>d</sup> **5:20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way.** Just as God used Nathan to turn David around (2 Samuel 12:1-15), God usually uses human means to “convert” sinners from error.

<sup>e</sup> **5:20 will save his soul from death.** There are three kinds of death described in Scripture: spiritual, physical and eternal. James does not specify which one here because he is likely referring to more than just physical death.

It is futile at this point to argue about whether James is speaking of believers or unbelievers. We can never really know for sure that another person is in God’s family. Those who wander from the truth need to be rescued. Let God sort out whether they are a backslider or a heathen.

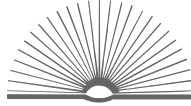
This statement has parenting applications. Proverbs 23:13-14 urges parents to discipline their children to save their souls from death. Parenting stops when we stand before God with our children.

<sup>f</sup> **5:20 and will cover a multitude of sins.** The idea of covering sins may point back to Psalm 32. David spoke of the blessedness of having sins “covered.” He was not speaking of a blessedness

James 5:19-20  
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that comes from successfully hiding sin, because he had just escaped that when he wrote the psalm. When your sin is covered before God it is not because you are good at hiding the truth from him. Since the atonement also pictures covering, we realize that the Father sees his bleeding Son bearing sin. His wrath is satisfied. Sin is covered.

Peter said, “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8; cf. Proverbs 10:12). Certainly the loving act of reaching a wayward brother “covers a multitude of sins” by turning him to the cross and keeping him from committing many more sins.

<sup>a</sup> 5:19-20 For those who contend that James wrote a letter de-emphasizing the importance of the cross and the gospel of grace, it should be noted that James ends this letter dealing with the remedy for error, sin, and death. After bringing us to despair that we do not have the kind of righteousness we need to approach God, James calls disciples to reach out to people with maladies no good work ever remedied. The cross casts its shadow over this entire letter. Error, sin and death are only taken away by the cross. The cross was just as much assumed in this letter as the work of God was assumed when the book of Esther was written. James is not a book about the cross like Esther is not a book about the providence of God.

You are your brother’s keeper. Personal ministry to wandering sinners must always start with what Jesus did on the cross. These last verses of James show us the cross and what happens when sinners are reached with the gospel:

1. Error ceases. The reason this points us to the cross is that Jesus died for people who fail to meet the standard of God’s word. Truth wins out next to error. The wandering sheep belongs inside well-defined boundaries and Jesus died to bring them back (see John 10).
2. Death is avoided. This directs us to the cross because Jesus died so that we might live.
3. Sins are covered. We are taken to the cross by the “covering sins” statement because our identity before God is wrapped up in the bloody death of our Redeemer. We dare not approach him with sins uncovered.

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