

James 5:19-20
Saving the Soul from Death

1

Introduction

Introduction: These closing verses express James's primary objective in writing his letter. He wanted to confront those in the church who possessed a false, dead faith. He has called professing believers to examine their faith to make sure that it is real.

2

Introduction

Jesus expressed that same concern in
Matthew 7:21-23

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. ²²Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ ²³And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

The point is clear. Not everyone who professes to be a Christian has saving faith.

3

Introduction

To help people avoid being deceived, James has given a series of tests by which one’s faith can be evaluated. True saving faith is marked by a proper response to trials, temptations, the Word of God, and God’s standards for holy living (chapter 1); its response to people from various social classes and its manifestation of righteous deeds (chapter 2); by proper speech, wisdom, and by not being a friend of the world (chapter 3); by humility and submission to God’s will (chapter 4); by a proper view of money and by truthfulness (chapter 5). Those tests form the benchmarks against which a person’s faith can be measured.

4

Introduction

In James 4:7-10, James gives a clear call to unbelievers for salvation. As James closes this letter, he gives one last appeal. This time James calls on believers to evangelize the unsaved.

These final verses provide four points to enable Christians to identify and help those in their church who lack genuine saving faith: the evidence, the threat, the instrument, and the goal.

5

James 5:19-20

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, ²⁰ let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

6

The Evidence

James 5:19a; 20b

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth ... ^{20b}he who turns a sinner from the error of his way

Here James uses the term “brethren” to refer to genuine believers, and as we have seen throughout the epistle, to show a change in thought or topic. The concluding two verses describe a different group from the weary, weak, persecuted believers who need to be ministered to by the elders. To the ministry of restoring struggling believers James adds the ministry of reconciling the unsaved in the church.

7

The Evidence

James 5:19a; 20b

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth ... ^{20b}he who turns a sinner from the error of his way

The phrase “if anyone among you” introduces this third category of people. In verse 13 this phrase described suffering Christians who needed to pray, and in verse 14 it described weak, defeated Christians who needed the care of the elders. Here it describes professed believers who need to be called to true salvation. Sadly, such people are to be found in every church; Jesus promised as much in Matthew 13:24-30, 37-43. The phrase “among you” indicates they are in the believing church, professing salvation. And every believer knows the heartbreak caused by those who profess Christ yet turn their backs on Him and live in open sin.

8

The Evidence

James 5:19a; 20b

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth ... ^{20b}he who turns a sinner from
the error of his way

The Greek grammatical structure of the phrase “if anyone among you wanders from the truth” indicates that this is a real possibility. “wanders” means “to error”, “to go astray”, “to apostatize. It is often used of straying from spiritual truth (Matthew 22:29; Luke 21:8; Heb. 3:10; 2 Pet. 2:15, 25).

The “truth” refers to the Word of God, primarily the gospel of salvation (cf. 1:18; 3:14). It is a sure mark of those whose faith is not genuine that they reject the truth of salvation and fall away doctrinally from the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints (Jude 3). John taught that to reject the person of Christ was to place yourself opposed to Him (1 John 2:22; 4:2-3). Jesus taught, however, that the mark of true disciples of His is that they continue in the Word (John 8:31).

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The Evidence

James 5:19a; 20b

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth ... ^{20b}he who turns a sinner from
the error of his way

When the false believer strays from God’s saving truth, he enters “the error of his way”. “Way” represents one’s “lifestyle”, or “pattern of living”. Again the word “error” here means “to stray”. False faith gives rise not only to false theology, but also an errant lifestyle. When a person rejects God’s Word, he also rejects the principles of Godly living it teaches. Truth and virtue go together, as do falsehood and evil behavior.

10

The Evidence

James 5:19a; 20b

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth ... ^{20b}he who turns a sinner from the error of his way

James defines the wanderer from sound doctrine and godly living as a “sinner”. This particular Greek word is not used of believers but is used for those who are unsaved. Though Christians may sin, sin will not be their continual, unbroken practice; it will not characterize their lives. A sinner, on the other hand, is one who continually, habitually practices sin. Such people John declared to be children of the devil, not of God (1 John 3:8- 9).

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The Evidence

James 5:19a; 20b

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth ... ^{20b}he who turns a sinner from the error of his way

In every church there are those who make shipwreck of their faith by straying from God’s truth. “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.” True believers are to pursue those whose faulty doctrine and sinful lives give evidence that they have departed from the true faith.

12

The Threat

James 5:20c

will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins

Realizing the terrible fate that awaits unrepentant sinners should motivate believers to call to salvation those who stray from the truth.

Nothing less than each person's eternal soul is at stake.

The threat facing the soul is death. This is the second death, eternal hell, and the final state of the unrepentant sinner (cf. Matt. 13:40, 42, 50; 25:41, 46; Mark 9:43–49; 2 Thess. 1:8–9; Rev. 20:11–15; 21:8). The ultimate end of sin, as James noted in chapter 1 of his epistle, is that it “brings forth death” (1:15). The apostle Paul states that, “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). Those with false faith have chosen their own way over God's and must face the consequences of their actions (Proverbs 14:12).

13

The Threat

James 5:20c

will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins

Unrepentant sinners face eternal death weighed down with a “multitude of sins”. It only takes one sin to condemn the sinner to hell. James's use of the word “multitude” to emphasizes the hopeless condition of sinners. Throughout their lives they accumulate a weight of sin that ultimately will pull them down into hell (Psalm 5:10; Isa. 59:12; Jer. 5:5–6; Rom. 2:5 3:10-18).

It is a serious matter that the unrepentant sinners in the church will be more guilty than the worst sinners who never professed Christ (Hebrews 10:26-29; Luke 12:47-48).

14

The Instrument

James 5:19b: 20b
“you ... him ... he”

James’s use of the above three pronouns defines the agents God uses to recover straying sinners.

It indicates that it is the task of all believers, not merely the pastors and elders to help rescue the perishing. The apostle Paul echoed that truth in 2 Corinthians 5:18 “Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

15

The Instrument

James 5:19b: 20b
“you ... him ... he”

In Luke 19:10 the Lord Jesus Christ defined His messianic mission when He said, “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost,” and His church is to follow His example (Matt. 28:19–20). The salvation of lost, doomed sinners brings joy to heaven (Luke 15:7, 10). Believers have the great privilege of participating in this ministry of reconciliation.

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The Goal

James 5:19b: 20c

turns him back ... he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins

The goal of reaching out to a false believer in the church is simple. The term “turns” is often translated as “Convert”. It used frequently in the New Testament to speak of the sinner’s conversion to God (e.g., Luke 1:16, 17; Acts 9:35; 14:15; 26:18, 20; 2 Cor. 3:16; 1 Pet. 2:25). In Acts 3:19 Peter urged his audience to “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out.”

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The Goal

James 5:19b: 20c

turns him back ... he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins

The Greek word translated “save” is the most common New Testament word for salvation. Turning the sinner to God in repentance results in salvation. As a result God will then “cover the multitude of sins” the repentant sinner has committed.

Only the death of Christ can provide forgiveness of sin (Eph. 1:7; 2:8–9). God casts believers’ sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19), removing them as far from us as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12).

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So What ...

God has granted to all believers the ministry of reconciling wandering souls to Himself. When the evidence indicates a professed believer's faith is not real, true Christians, knowing the terrible threat of eternal death that person faces, must make it their goal to turn him back from his sin to genuine saving faith in God.

By so doing they will exhibit true wisdom, for "he who is wise wins souls" (Prov. 11:30).