

# Studies in James

## Lesson 22 – (Conclusion)

### How To Handle Straying Saints

#### INTRODUCTION:

- I. On Sunday evenings, over the past 7 months, we have been engaged in a very detailed study of what is believed to have been the very first letter ever written to Christians in the New Testament.
  - A. If I were to ask most people what book of the New Testament was the first to be written, many would say Matthew or one of the gospels of Mark, Luke or John.
    1. But most biblical scholars believe the very first book written to the church of the first century was the epistle or letter of James.
    2. It was written perhaps as early as 45 AD, which would be about the same time as Paul and Barnabas began their first missionary journey together.
  - B. But perhaps the MOST important thing about the writing of the book of James is WHY it was written.
    1. Following the establishment of the Lord's church in 33 AD, the body of Christ expanded rapidly throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

2. Thousands of Jewish believers were accepting Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, and were being baptized into Christ for the remission of their sins.
  3. But almost immediately, the church began encountering intense persecution from the Jewish religious leaders who wanted end to what THEY believed was outright heresy.
  4. As persecution of Christians living in Judea, Samaria and even as far away as the city of Damascus began to intensify, many Christians began losing their faith and either outright abandoned Christ, or lived their lives in such a way that you couldn't tell them apart from any other worldly person.
  5. Therefore, this book was written to confront Christians who were living hypocritical lives – professing to be followers of Jesus Christ while at the same time living worldly, and sometimes outright ungodly, lives.
- C. But one thing that makes this book so unique is its author.
1. Although the author of the book simply identifies himself as *"James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.. "* (**James 1:1**), and even though FIVE MEN in the New Testament went by the name James, most biblical scholars believe the author of this book is none other than James, one of the sons of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and therefore, one of the brothers of Jesus.

- II. Therefore, knowing all we've learned about the book of James, and the purpose for which it was written, it should come as no surprise that James would conclude his letter with a timeless subject – how to handle straying saints.
  - A. Dealing with wayward Christians raises several important questions.
    - 1. For example, what is our relationship with them to be?
    - 2. Is there ever a time when one Christian should step in and deal with another who is walking away from God?
    - 3. Is dealing with straying saints strictly a function of the Holy Spirit, in convicting them, or should we become a part of the solution?
      - a. And if we ARE to become involved, how can we do that without appearing to be legalistic or judgmental?
  - B. Therefore, to help us answer these questions, let's consider James' final remarks – found in **James 5:19-20**.
    - 1. **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.*

**BODY:**

- I. Before we take a close look at this text, I want to make certain that we do not make the mistake that SOME make.

- A. SOME people seem to feel they've been called to a "ministry of criticism."
  - 1. Their primary concern is to "nail" those who have strayed from the truth.
  - 2. They seem overly quick to point out the other person's faults.
    - a. They delight in pointing the finger of guilt, and are very slow to show a sensitive, understanding and compassionate heart.
- B. James' counsel has absolutely nothing to do with this kind of approach.
  - 1. Take a look at **James chapter 4**.
    - a. **James 4:11-12** – *Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 12 There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?*
    - b. In these verses, James deals with slander – where a Christian speaks against a brother or sister in Christ.
      - (1). This has nothing to do with exhorting a brother or sister, but rather of sniping at them from the sidelines.
        - (a). There is a deliberate tone of condemnation here.

(2). James says, we have no business judging our brother in that regard – trying to pass off backbiting and speaking evil of a brother as some kind of godly admonition.

2. Now compare this with what the Lord teaches in **Matthew 7**.

a. **Matthew 7:1-5** – *"Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. 3 And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? 5 Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."*

b. Here, Jesus condemns judging in a hypocritical way.

c. But notice something else that we often overlook.

(1). The main thrust of Jesus' teaching here is directed toward **HELPING** your brother.

(a). Jesus says, "once you've gotten the log out of your own eye, **THEN** you'll be able to see clearly to get the speck out of your brother's eye."

(b). Jesus is saying there is a place where we take the specks out of our brother's eye.

3. This is clearly a sensitive issue.
  - a. In fact, I think it's significant that Jesus uses the eye.
    - (1). There are few places on our body that are as sensitive as the eye.
      - (a). The slightest particle can cause intense pain and irritation.
  - b. If we had something in our eye that caused us great pain, how would we want someone to get it out?
    - (1). Would we want them to roughly go in there with a pair of pliers and a screwdriver to get it out?
    - (2). Or would we want the skilled hands of a surgeon to gently remove the particle so as to cause us to least amount of pain?

II. With all this in mind, notice that the first half of James' comments in **chapter 5** provides some important facts to help us understand the text.

A. First, notice in **verse 19** to whom this counsel is addressed.

1. It is directed to "brethren." In other words, it is addressed to Christians and has to do with those who are in the Christian life, those who are in fellowship with the Lord.
  - a. We certainly notice the way "people of the world" act, and that rightly concerns us.

- (1). When we have the opportunity to talk with the unsaved about their specific conduct we should do that.
  - (a). Although great care should be taken to not come across as being "just another one of those self-righteous Christians."
  - (b). In some instances, it might be more prudent to not say anything at all to someone who is acting ungodly, but rather continue living the right kind of example before them.
  - (c). Even Jesus said, "Cast not your pearls before swine lest they turn and rend you."
2. Notice ALSO that this counsel is NOT ONLY addressed to "brethren," but to "brethren AMONG YOU."
  - a. James has in mind those among our LOCAL fellowship of believers – meaning our PRIMARY responsibility is to straying saints in our LOCAL fellowship.
    - (1). This is NOT saying that we can't encourage and admonish those who might attend another congregation – UNLESS we don't know them.
      - (a). In other words, it's not our duty to go around to neighboring congregations, pointing the finger at their members who may not be living right.

(b). That's the duty of the saints in THAT fellowship, not yours or mine.

(2). However, if we're a good friend of someone who attends elsewhere, and we see that they're straying, then we have a God-given responsibility to do all we can.

B. Second, notice what has prompted James to write these words.

1. He says someone has "strayed" from the truth.

a. The word "strayed" has the same Greek root as our word "planet."

(1). It depicts the movement of a heavenly body that once were firmly in their designated orbits – but not seems to wander across the sky with no sense of direction or purpose.

(2). In this sense, it carries the idea of someone leaving something he or she once knew in an intimate way.

b. Once again, it's a Christian that is implied here.

(1). Because, an unbeliever can't stray from something they never knew in the first place.

C. Third, consider what the straying saints left.

1. James says that the wandering Christian has left "the truth."

a. This covers a lot of territory – but certainly refers to the scriptural truth – God's truth revealed in the scriptures.



2. It's also important to consider the action of straying from the truth.
  - a. The words here seem to suggest someone who has consciously and actively strayed from the truth, rather than someone who passively slipped away.
    - (1). It implies that this person made a deliberate, conscious decision to walk away.

D. Finally, consider what should be done in cases like this.

1. The straying person should be turned back – someone needs to step in, make contact with him, and redirect him so that he returns to where he belongs.
  - a. This is where the issue becomes very delicate – sensitive.
    - (1). The idea is turning someone around who was going in the wrong direction – so that they are now going in the right direction.
  - b. Where do we begin in order to turn someone back?

II. In Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia, the apostle offers some very practical guidelines in dealing with this sensitive issue.

A. Let's examine the passage together.

1. **Galatians 6:1-3** – *Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. 2 Bear one*

*another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.*

2. I think we can all see that the KEY to turning someone back is in each one of US having a proper ATTITUDE toward the brother or sister who has strayed from the Lord.
  - a. Having a proper attitude is REALLY where it all begins.
  - b. If we're going to help someone find their way back to the Lord, we need to cultivate the right attitude toward them – otherwise our efforts will be useless.
  - c. If we think we can simply walk up and REBUKE someone who has strayed from the Lord, and think that ONE ACT will turn them around, then we're simply deceiving ourselves.
  - d. There is a great deal MORE we need to do.
3. The apostle Paul says we need to "RESTORE" them – which simply means making them useful for service once again.
  - a. The word "restore" comes from a Greek term that is used to speak of setting bones; or of mending nets.
  - b. For example, this same word appears in **Mark 1:19**, where it says: *When He [Jesus] had gone a little farther from there, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the boat MENDING their nets.*

- c. James and John were RESTORING their nets or MENDING their nets because fishing nets with holes in them can't catch fish.
  - d. So, they were RESTORING or MENDING their nets to make them useful for service once again.
  - e. And that's the SAME IDEA Paul has in mind when he says *"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual RESTORE such a one..."*
  - f. We are to do all we can to help make them useful for service once again.
- B. But I want you to also notice that the apostle Paul identifies THREE SPECIFIC THINGS we MUST BE and DO to help turn around a straying saint.
- 1. First, WE must be SPIRITUAL, and that comes by develop a dependence on the Holy Spirit.
    - a. Paul says, *"you who are SPIRITUAL restore such a one..."*  
**(Galatians 6:1)**
    - b. What does it mean to be SPIRITUAL?
      - (1). Paul is speaking about someone who is under the INFLUENCE of the Holy Spirit – someone who is RECEPTIVE to spiritual teachings, and who tries to the

very best of their ability to LIVE by those spiritual principles.

- b. The one who is MOST effective in turning straying saints around is one whose heart has been WARMED and SHAPED by the grace of God.
    - (1). When THIS kind of person speaks, others listen.
    - (2). Why? Because they realize a "spiritual" person is talking to them.
      - (a). NOT someone who is SINLESS, or PERFECT, or who NEVER makes mistakes.
      - (b). But rather, someone who IS JUST LIKE THEM, but who has learned to DEPEND ON and TRUST IN GODS amazing grace, mercy and forgiveness.
      - (c). Someone who has to pray, "God be merciful to ME, a sinner."
  - c. Those who seek to RESTORE a wandering brother or sister in Christ need to be so IN-TUNED with God that their words come forth as though they were coming from the Lord Himself.
2. The SECOND thing we must do when seeking to restore a straying saint is to restore them in the spirit of GENTLENESS.

- a. When working with someone who is either wounded or broken spiritually, having a spirit of GENTLENESS is VITALLY important.
    - (1). This is NOT the time for someone to rush in and display an attitude of intolerance and impatience.
    - (2). We can be determined in our rebuke – not giving in one inch to sin – but at the same time warm and loving.
    - (3). The straying saint needs to know that we DO NOT LOVE the sin in their life, but we DO LOVE them.
  - b. We need to keep in mind that a wandering saint is extremely sensitive – in fact, perhaps the most sensitive persons in the world are the carnal (fleshly-minded) Christians.
    - (1). **Proverbs 18:19** – *A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city, contentions are like the bars of a castle.*
  - c. Therefore, GENTLENESS and TIME are critical ingredients – it may take months or perhaps even years of gently urging a straying brother or sister to turn around and come back to the Lord.
3. And finally, Paul says we must restore them in the spirit of GENUINE HUMILITY if we are going to be effective in turning around a straying saint.

- a. Paul said, "*considering* [or "*looking*"] *to yourselves, lest you also be tempted.*" (**Galatians 6:1**)
- b. People who are MOST successful in this kind of ministry are PAINFULLY aware of their OWN sins, and their OWN limitations and weaknesses.
- c. They NEVER come across as "holier than thou!"
- d. They NEVER say, "how could you DO such a thing?!"
- e. Rather, they are able to say, "I've been in your shoes. I've been there. I know what it's like to struggle with sin and lose the battle."
- f. THAT'S genuine humility.

III. So, when we have the right attitude that James mentions, and when we do the three things Paul says we must do in restoring a wandering saint, what are the results of this kind of approach?

A. Let's go back to **James chapter 5** – it's here that James tells us there are two things that will happen when we take this kind of approach.

1. First, James says, "*let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death...*" (**James 5:20a**)

- a. I think there are two ways we can look at this idea of saving a soul from death.

- (1). In one sense, the straying one's soul will be save from a death-like existence.
    - (a). The Christian who has wandered away from the Lord or who is living in sin is one of the most tormented people alive.
    - (b). They once knew the joy of having an intimate relationship and fellowship with God and Jesus, and other Christians.
    - (c). But all that joy is now gone – there is a terrible emptiness, a tremendous void in their life.
    - (d). Therefore, when we restore a wandering saint, we save them from living another day in that terribly lonely death-like existence.
  - (2). And secondly, we can think of saving a the soul of the straying saint from spiritual death – being spiritually separated from God.
2. But there is one more thing that happens when we turn a sinner from the error of his way – we "*cover a multitude of sins.*" (**James 5:20b**)
    - a. The word "*cover*" simply means to hide or conceal.

- b. In the context of James, the word means the sins of a wandering saint are covered or concealed by a blanket of grace, mercy, compassion and love.
- c. Two other passages carry the same idea:
  - (1). **Proverbs 10:12** – *Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins.*
  - (2). **1 Peter 4:8** – *And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins."*
- d. Since the wandering saint has returned and has confessed their sins to God, their sins are completely forgiven – covered over completely and permanently by the grace, mercy, compassion and love of God.
  - (1). **Micah 7:18-19** – The prophet Micah says it best: *"Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. 19 He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."*
- e. And, in turn, we ALSO cover their sins with a blanket of OUR OWN grace, mercy, compassion and love toward THEM.



- f. WE became actively involved in reaching out to this wandering saint because we loved them SO MUCH and couldn't allow them to continue living a self-destructive life – we HAD to intervene out of deep love and concern for THEM.

IV. In closing this wonderful epistle to first-century saints, there are FOUR GREAT PRINCIPLES we need to see in these final remarks of James, the Lord's brother.

A. What are they?

1. First, we can see that there are definite occasions when we need to become involved in turning a sinner from the error of his way.
  - a. There are times when we need to become involved in removing a speck from our brother's eye.
2. Second, the entire process of turning a sinner from the error of his way must be under the direction and influence of the Holy Spirit.
  - a. This is not the time for an ego trip.
  - b. This whole process must be done by someone who is in touch with God – someone whose life is guided by the Spirit-given word.
3. Third, to turn a sinner from the error of his way, our attitude is as important as the action we take.
  - a. Our attitude should be one of genuine love and concern.

- b. The straying saint needs to know that we're not above sin ourselves – and in fact, have had to go to God in prayer on many occasions to ask for the forgiveness of OUR sins.
    - 4. And finally, when we turn a sinner from the error of his way we have helped RESTORE a brother or sister, and helped them to once again be useful for service in the Lord's kingdom.
      - a. We have done our part in saving a soul from death, and in covering a multitude of sins.
  - B. I think all of us understand it's not easy approaching a brother or sister in Christ who has turned away from the Lord.
    - 1. It's not a popular thing to do – and certainly it's not always well received, especially by those whose hearts may not be ready to change.
    - 2. But when we consider the benefits, it's worth whatever we have to go through to keep someone from losing everything.

**CONCLUSION:**

- I. I hope this journey through the book of James has caused you to take a serious look at your own life – that's exactly what James intended his words to do.

- A. As I mentioned at the beginning of this series, and again at the beginning of this lesson, James was writing to people who were struggling.
1. The book was written to people just like you and me – people who struggle with trials, persecutions, hardships, worries, cares and concerns, and all the other factors in life that try to pull us away from the Lord.
  2. The book was written to people like you and me who are like that man who looked in a mirror and saw himself just as he was – flawed, imperfect, and desperately in need of God's grace and mercy.
  3. And the book was written to people like you and me to help us find a better way – a way of life that the Lord desires for us all.
- B. But, like the man who looked in the mirror and saw himself for who he really was, some of those who read the words of James will see a need for change in their lives, but then simply walk away and forget everything they saw.
1. That's why James closes with the admonition for us to do all we can to reach out to those who have wandered away from the faith, and bring them back to the Lord.

C. So, as we close this wonderful, and sometimes painfully probing, book I want you to ask yourself this question: *Am I a soul that needs to be saved from death, and whose sins need to be covered by God's grace?*

1. I can assure you that you ARE a soul that needs to be saved from death and whose sins need to be covered if you are in either of these two categories.

a. If you've never obeyed the gospel of Christ – if you've never come to Jesus Christ in complete faith and obedience, repenting of your sins, and been baptized into Christ for the remission of your sins, or...

b. If you've turned from the Lord and wandered back into the world from which you were once redeemed.

2. If you are in either of these two categories, won't you come to the Lord now?