

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

GOD'S SEARCH AND RESCUE MINISTRY

James 5:19-20

By

Steven J. Cole

November 6, 2005

© Steven J. Cole, 2005

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly
sermons via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

November 6, 2005
James Lesson 25

God's Search and Rescue Ministry
James 5:19-20

It's always an anxious moment, especially for families and friends, when someone is reported missing in the wilderness. Search and rescue teams spring into action. We wait expectantly for any word of locating the missing person. It's a moment of great joy if they find the person alive and well, but a time of great sorrow when they're too late.

If you are a Christian, then you're a member of God's search and rescue team. But even though every believer is on the team, I find that many never respond to the call to go out into the storm and look for the lost. Can you imagine being lost in the woods, but no one came looking for you? When you finally stagger out to civilization, you ask why no one came looking.

One member of the search and rescue team says, "It was really cold and stormy, and there was a good show on TV. So I just prayed for you to be okay." Another says, "I wanted to be sensitive to your feelings. I thought you might be embarrassed if we came looking." Another says, "I wasn't sure you were *really* lost. It would be judgmental to imply that you actually were lost. Besides, it would be arrogant of me to say that I'm not lost. After all, we all have our own paths on the journey." That's *not* the kind of search and rescue team that I would want if I were lost!

I admit that what James tells us to do here is one of the most difficult things God asks us to do as Christians, namely,

Believers are responsible to help restore
straying sinners to the truth.

That task is often about as pleasant as trying to help a wounded dog—you're probably going to get bit no matter how gently you try to help. When you're successful, it's a moment of great joy, as when a search and rescue team announces, "We have found him and he is alive and well." Yes! But even the hope of success doesn't make the task any easier. But since you're on God's

search and rescue team, you need to learn how to do the job. Note three things:

1. Professing Christians stray from the truth both doctrinally and morally.

The first question to answer is, "Is James talking about backsliding believers, or is he talking about evangelizing those who do not know Christ?" The first part of verse 19 would indicate that James is talking about believers ("My brethren, if any among you strays..."). But when verse 20 talks about saving his soul from death, it sounds like saving a soul from hell.

Some assume that James is talking only about believers. Since believers cannot lose their salvation, they interpret verse 20 as saving the person from physical death as God's discipline for sin. The other approach, which I believe to be correct, is to say that James is writing to the church, but he knows that there are some in the church that have made professions of faith, but they are not genuinely saved. This fits with the overall theme of James, which is to emphasize that true saving faith is not just to make a decision or to say, "I believe in Jesus." True saving faith always, necessarily results in a life of good works.

In James 1:22, he exhorted, "But prove yourselves to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves." In 2:14, he asks rhetorically, "What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?" He states (2:17), "Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself." (See also, 2:26.)

The correct biblical doctrine of "eternal security" is *not* that a person prays to accept Jesus into his heart and he will never lose his salvation. It is not that a person makes a decision to receive Christ and he can instantly be assured that he is going to heaven, no matter how he lives after that.

The true biblical doctrine is that genuine salvation is not primarily a human decision, but rather it is God changing the sinner's heart, raising him from spiritual death to spiritual life. This new life that God imparts necessarily results in a new way of living. Rather than hating God, the newborn Christian will love God and desire to please Him. Rather than living for his own selfish pleasure, the

believer will yield to Jesus as Lord and seek to live for His glory. I'm *not* talking about *sinless perfection*, but rather about the overall *direction* that necessarily results from a new heart and new life. We see this clearly in 1 John 3:7-9:

Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

When John says, "he cannot sin," he does not mean that it is impossible for a believer to commit sin. He is not contradicting himself in 1 John 1:8, where he said, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us." Believers do sin, sometimes in horrible ways. But the difference is, when a believer sins he is grieved and deeply troubled. He cannot go on in sin. God's Spirit convicts him and he knows that he has displeased his Lord. So the believer who sins repents and turns back to the Lord. He strives daily against sin and he sets up safeguards to prevent falling into sin again. The overall direction of his life is to grow in holiness and to bear fruit for God.

We see this in Jesus' parable of the sower (Matt. 13:3-9, 18-23; Mark 4:3-9, 13-20; Luke 8:5-8, 10-15). Some of the seed fell on the hard ground of the road and the birds snatched it away. This represents unbelievers who hear the word, but Satan snatches it away.

Other seed fell on the shallow soil that had a hard, rocky layer beneath it. This seed immediately sprang up, but when the sun came out, it withered because it did not have deep roots. Jesus said that this seed represents those who "receive the word with joy," they "believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away" (Luke 8:13). Their "faith" did not produce any fruit.

The third seed fell among thorns. It sprouted up for a while, but then the thorns choked it out and it did not bear any fruit. Jesus explained that this refers to those who "are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity" (Luke 8:14).

The fourth seed fell on the good soil. "These are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance" (Luke 8:15). These alone represent true believers, who persevere and bear fruit.

So, to go back to our text, James is referring to one of the last three groups. The straying one may be a temporary, rocky soil "believer" or a thorny soil "believer." Neither type is truly saved because they do not bring forth the fruit of saving faith. In James' terms, their faith is a dead faith. Or, he may be a true believer who has fallen into sin.

How do we know which group the person is in? Answer: by his response to our efforts to restore him to the truth. If he walks away from the Lord and goes on in sin, most likely he is not truly saved. If he repents and comes back to the Lord, his faith is genuine. By helping him to turn back and persevere in faith and obedience, you have saved his soul from death and covered a multitude of sins (more on that in a moment).

Note one other thing here: In verse 19, James says that this person has strayed "from the truth." In verse 20, he mentions turning him from "the error of his way." To stray from the truth implies departing from the truth of the gospel, or some core Christian doctrine. It may also include moral deviation, but that is more in focus in the phrase, "the error of his way." The point is that doctrinal error and sin are usually intertwined. Sometimes a person embraces false doctrine because he has fallen into serious sin, and he needs to deny sound doctrine to justify his sin. At other times, the person embraces some serious doctrinal error, and before long his false doctrine opens the door for him to embrace sin. If you're seeking to help restore a person who is espousing some doctrinal error, you probably need to probe for some underlying sin.

So, James is acknowledging that professing Christians will stray from the truth, both doctrinally and morally. We do not know their true heart condition before God until we seek to restore them and see how they respond.

2. The search and rescue ministry is the responsibility of all believers.

Note two things here:

- A. This ministry is the responsibility of all believers, not just of pastors.

James addresses the church (“My brethren”) and is general when he says, “and one turns him back.” He does not say, “One of the elders or pastors turns him back.” This ministry is the responsibility of every Christian who is walking with the Lord. In Galatians 6:1, Paul puts it this way, “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” To be “spiritual” means to be spiritually mature, to be walking in the Spirit and developing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 22-23).

This means that, unless you’re a relatively new Christian, if you know of someone who is straying from the truth, you must go to him (or her) to help turn him back to the Lord. (I’ll give specific instructions at the end of this message.) If you feel inadequate to do this, you should inform an elder who can guide you. But to ignore someone who is straying is like a member of the search and rescue team sitting at home watching TV while someone is lost in the woods. It’s not the loving thing to do!

- B. This ministry requires both search and rescue.

Searching is required because professing believers who fall into sin seldom stay with the flock. We must go after them. If you know of someone who made a profession of faith, but who has dropped out of the church, you need to go looking for him to find out what’s wrong.

Rescue is required because it is seldom that such straying persons find their way back on their own, without someone to guide them. The enemy confuses their sense of direction. Or, they are ashamed at what they’ve done, so they need to be assured of God’s forgiveness if they will repent and confess their sins. They also need instruction on how not to stray again, so that they don’t repeat the process. They need someone who knows God and the way back, to teach them God’s ways to avoid and resist sin.

3. The aims of the search and rescue ministry are to restore the sinner to the truth, to save his soul from death, and to cover a multitude of sins.

The work of search and rescue is difficult and sometimes disheartening. It doesn't always turn out the way you would hope. But when you do find a straying sinner and get him back from the path of destruction, it brings great joy. James mentions three aims:

- A. The search and rescue ministry aims to restore the sinner to the truth.

The sinner has strayed from the truth, and so our aim is to restore him to the truth. James' words imply what many in our culture deny, that there is such a thing as *absolute spiritual truth*. When a person strays from it, you can know it. The truth is not a subjective feeling, but an objective reality. James is referring especially to the truth of the gospel. He uses the word "truth" that way in 1:18: "In the exercise of His will, He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures." He uses *truth* one other time, in 3:14: "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth." This shows that for James, truth is not just doctrinal knowledge, but also godly living.

Our postmodern culture rejects the idea of absolute truth, especially in the spiritual realm. What is true for you is fine for you, but it's not true for me unless I happen to like it. It would be judgmental and arrogant for me to say that you're wrong and I'm right. Rather, you can be right and I can be right, even though we hold to opposite beliefs, because spiritual truth is redefined as subjective experience or preference, not as objective reality.

But the Bible asserts that there is absolute spiritual truth that saves the soul, and absolute error that damns. Paul told the Galatians that if they believed in a different gospel than the one that he had preached to them, they were damned (Gal. 1:6-9; see also 2 Cor. 11:3-4). In 2 Thessalonians 2:10, Paul mentions "those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved." So the truth is not a subjective opinion or preference. It is something objective that must be believed if you are to be saved! The essential truth is the gospel, that we are saved solely by God's grace through faith in Christ, apart from our good works, but that genuine saving faith results in good works (Eph. 2:8-10).

- B. The search and rescue ministry aims to save the sinner's soul from death.

As I said, some think that this refers to a believer whose sin leads to physical death. It is true that God may take the life of a sinning believer (1 Cor. 11:30; 1 John 5:16). But that is not the meaning here, in that God does not take the physical life of every sinning believer. James is talking about saving a soul from spiritual death. The only other time James uses "death" (1:15), he says, "when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death." The natural course of unchecked sin ends in spiritual separation from God. Elsewhere, James uses the word "save" three times (1:21; 2:14; 4:12) to refer to spiritual salvation. Only once (5:15) does it refer to physical healing.

So if a person who claims to know Christ turns toward sin and continues on that path, he may not be a true believer. In the terms of 1 John 3, he is revealing by his practice that he is not born of God. If God uses you to help him repent and turn back to the Lord, then you have saved his soul from a path that would have led to spiritual death—eternal separation from God in the lake of fire. To rescue someone from a burning building is a great thing. To rescue someone from eternal burning is far greater!

- C. The search and rescue ministry aims to cover a multitude of sins.

This alludes to Proverbs 10:12, "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions." Peter also cites that verse, "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8). Both of those texts refer to not broadcasting the sins of others and to forgiving one another.

But James seems primarily to be pointing in the direction of Psalm 32:1, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!" When a sinner turns to the Lord, He forgives all of his sins. If a professing believer persists in sin, he should not be assured that he is eternally secure. The Bible never gives that comfort to an unrepentant person. The warning passages in Hebrews are designed to make such persons examine whether their profession of faith is genuine or not.

James may intend a secondary sense, namely, that by leading a sinner to repentance, you help cover his past or potential future sins from public view. James also implies that when you help restore a sinner to God, you must be careful not to reveal his sins any farther than is necessary for restoration. Your aim is to restore the sinner before God and man.

Conclusion

You're on God's search and rescue team. Here are your specific instructions:

(1) *Who should go?* If you have knowledge of the sin and you have a relationship with the person, you're it! Truth is most often received through loving relationships.

(2) *Get the facts.* Do not go on hearsay or gossip. If someone tells you of someone else in sin, you should ask, "Have you personally checked out the facts?" Then, direct the one telling you not to talk to anyone else, but to go to the sinning person. If you are the one to go, don't begin with accusations. First, ask questions to determine the truth. Does the issue involve a major doctrine or opinion on a minor issue? Is it a matter of immaturity or spiritual weakness, where you need to help him grow, or of defiantly walking away from God (1 Thess. 5:14)?

(3) *Check your own heart.* There is no room for being judgmental. "Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). Your motive should be to restore the straying one, not to put him in his place or to prove that you're right and he's wrong. Make sure that you are under the control of the Holy Spirit and displaying the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 22-23; 6:1). The word "restore" (Gal. 6:1) was used of mending torn nets and of setting broken bones so that they would heal. Think of how gently you would want a doctor to do that with you, and be that gentle in dealing with a person caught in some sin.

(4) *Pray.* Do not attempt to restore a straying person before you pray for him (James 5:16-18). Prayer puts you in the right place before God, dependent on His grace. Only then are you able to minister to the straying. You can't properly talk to men about God until you've talked to God about men. Especially, pray for the right time and opening.

(5) *Make sure that love for God and love for your brother are your motives for going.* You should desire to please God and you should show genuine concern for your erring brother. Generally, if a man is in sin, another man should go to him. If a woman is in sin, another woman should go. It is not wise for a man to go alone to a woman (other than his wife or a family member), or for a woman to go alone to talk to a man.

(6) *Go directly to the person.* Do not go behind his back and try to campaign for your point of view or to try to convince others to do what God is calling you to do. Go alone at first. If he listens, you've won your brother. If he refuses to listen, take two or three others. Eventually, it may need to be told to the church (Matt. 18:15-17).

(7) *Think through in advance the proper approach and wording.* Study how Nathan confronted David for starters (2 Sam. 12:1-14). Dr. Howard Hendricks tells of how the wife of a workaholic pastor, who was neglecting his family, asked him to speak with her husband. Hendricks waited until they were alone and casually asked, "Do you smoke?" The pastor was shocked by the question and replied, "Of course not!" Hendricks persisted, "Why not?" He got what he expected: "Because my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit." Then Hendricks sprang the trap: "Then why are you abusing the temple and neglecting your family by overworking?" Pow! Be prepared for the one in sin to accuse you of some shortcoming, and do not get into a verbal war. Just stick to the issue.

If you're sitting in your easy chair by the fire and you know of a brother or sister who is lost in the storm, God asks you to inconvenience yourself. Get up, put on your coat, and go out into the storm to try to rescue your brother. It may not be fun, but it is an expression of genuine love and faith in action. That's what James is all about!

Application Questions

1. Many Christians avoid trying to restore a sinning believer because confrontation makes them uncomfortable. Is this valid?
2. How can you know whether just to pray or when it is time to talk with a sinning person?
3. Some Christians use their own shortcomings as an excuse for not talking to another believer about his sin. Is this valid? How should it be addressed?
4. How does the biblical doctrine of perseverance differ from the popular teaching, "once saved, always saved"?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2005, All Rights Reserved.