

Repeat Prescription for Spiritual Health amid Trials & Suffering iii. Keep Looking Outwards to Others

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] So we're now going to turn to our Bible reading for this evening. Willie Phillip, our senior minister, is finishing up our time in the letter of James this evening.

! And so we're going to read a little from the beginning of the letter, and then some right from the very end as well. So do grab your Bible. If you don't have one, we've got plenty of visitor's Bibles spread around.

If you're not sure where to get one, if you wave your arm, I'm sure one of the welcome team will be delighted to bring one to you. And do turn up and follow along as we read first from James chapter 1.

It's page 1011, if you're using a visitor's Bible. James chapter 1, beginning at verse 1. James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion.

Greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. For you knew that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

[1 : 10] And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

But let him ask in faith, with no doubting. For the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.

He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. Then turn over to James chapter 5. We pick up at verse 16.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.

[2 : 24] Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. 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.

Amen. This is God's word. And we'll return to it shortly. Well, let's turn for one last time to the letter of James.

And you should have, I hope on your seats, a little outline. I thought it would be helpful as we come to our final study to give you this little schema of the flow of the letter, to remind ourselves of the key issues.

And you might find that it's helpful to read through the letter again with that in your hand. And it will help you, I hope, to recall the things that we've learned together from James. James is a spiritual physician.

He's seeking the health of the church by probing to show up symptoms and signs of disease and of ill health. And he's getting to the very heart of the pathology in order to bring healing, to bring restoration of health to the very troubled churches.

[3 : 54] And at the very start of the letter, if you look on the sheet there, you'll see, you remember, he introduces the patient, if you like, and the presenting complaint. The church is in the world, it's under Christ's lordship, and yet is facing trials of many kinds in a hostile world.

But he says that in God's hands, all of these struggles are for the perfecting of true faith. And so his prescription for spiritual health is clearly laid out in the first 11 verses or so of chapter 1.

To walk in the divine wisdom of true faith, in all the different circumstances of life. Keep looking forward with perseverance to the glory to come, he says, first of all.

God will give us what he's promised in his time and in his way. And in the meantime, keep looking upwards in prayer to God for the grace that we need today, because God will give what we need. He'll give without reserve if we ask him without reserve. In other words, with undivided hearts, wanting him to answer us his way. And he encourages us that the prognosis is wonderfully hopeful. [5 : 06] God's purpose, verse 12 of chapter 1, is that we persevere through all these trials to the crown of life itself. That's his purpose. But it's not automatic.

We must walk in the wisdom from above. The divine wisdom that leads to the crown of life. Not the wisdom from below.

The demonic wisdom of the world. Verse 15 is very clear. That leads only to death. And the problem is that the pathology report James has seen is very concerning.

Because not only is the church in the world, but he sees that the world is very seriously infecting the church. Remember verses 13 to 15 of chapter 1 there, remind us that our sinful nature remains. And it's all too active. And so we must be in a very real battle against sin. Don't be deceived about that, he says. But there's also real encouragement, because we have been reborn from above through the word of truth to be the holy first fruits of God himself.

[6 : 14] And we need to know this too, my beloved brothers, he says. So preventive medicine against sin is the best way. And he goes on to speak about that.

Go on growing, he says, by the life-giving word that is able to save you. That is by hearing God's word truly. Humbly receiving it.

Not rejecting it proudly. That means doing it, not being deceived and deceiving yourselves. But the question he puts to us is this.

Could we be being deceived? Are we really sharing the family likeness of our Heavenly Father above? Is the fruit of real faith evident in the life?

Or could it just be the fraud of a false religion? And so Dr. James lays out his paternity tests, if you like, in verses 26 and 27, do you remember?

[7 : 13] And he shows us what God's character is like. He's already shown that in verses 17 and 18. The true character of our Heavenly Father who brings us to birth. He treats sinners, he says, by giving every good gift to us, not by trying to gain from us.

And he talks to sinners bringing life through his word of truth. He doesn't bring death. He fathers his people. He doesn't fight with them. And what he treasures in our lives is the first fruits of his holiness.

It's the very opposite of the horrible hellish behavior that seems to be going on in the churches. And what James is saying is that obviously God's true children will be marked by these same things.

A spirit of serving, not status-seeking, in how they treat other sinners. Of peacemaking, not provoking, in how they talk to other sinners and about them.

And of wisdom and not worldliness in the things that they treasure for themselves in their own life and also for the lives of one another. And the problem is that at first sight, these churches seem to fail the test very badly.

[8 : 21] And so, Dr. James has to get into much deeper investigation. Diagnostic probing, painful remedial medicine is going to be needed.

And that's what he's doing right through the rest of this letter. To convince them, first of all, that they really are sick and that they need help. And so he examines these three test areas in turn very deeply and shows them just how deep in the heart this pathology lies.

And that's very often to recognize pathology. You need to set a diseased organ alongside a healthy organ. And in chapter 1, verse 19, in a way, in a very pithy way, he lays out for us what healthy faith, what humble faith really does look like.

It's quick to hear God's word. It's slow to speak to others. And it's slow to anger. But what James seems to see in all his probing is the very opposite of that.

Chapter 2 shows us that they weren't wise, but they were actually very worldly in their attitudes to wealth and to status and to worldly glory. They're not quick, but they're slow to actually do what God commands them.

[9 : 38] And far from hearing and doing, from showing living fruit in how they treat God's people and being giving servants of others like the Lord, well, it seems they're far more taken up with grasping at status for themselves and then fawning over status in other people in a very worldly way.

No, says James. Partiality like that denies true living faith. Now, loving freely as you ought, by contrast, demands truly obedient faith.

Only fruitful obedience to God's command will demonstrate faith that really is saving faith, like Abraham's faith, he says, like Rahab's faith. And then in chapter 3, in the first half of chapter 4, he exposes them as not being slow, but far too quick to speak and quick to anger.

Not wise in any ways, but worldly. Worldly ambition, Christian leaders, is what leads to worldly anger in Christian churches. So he says, for Christian leaders, don't seek ambitious, angry men, however gifted they are, but seek patient, peaceable, godly men.

True teaching is something that's visible in the fruit, in the life, in the legacy of these people. By their fruits, you will know them, said Jesus.

[10 : 59] Not by their gifts. And that's such an important word that the church needs today, just as much as it needed in those days. And similarly, in church life, James commands very sternly in chapter 4, not to be proud and haughty towards one another, but to be penitent, to be humble towards God.

And then, in the latter part of chapter 4 through chapter 5, verse 6, he warns believers against worldly arrogance in the way that we live in these last days.

Instead, we're to show living fruit, not dead faith, by the things that we're seen to treasure in our lives in these last days. We're not to be arrogantly judging people, not to be presumptuously making plans either for our lives without reference to God.

It's God's will alone and God's judgment that matters. And then he reminds us that persecution and pain at the hands of, very often, the very rich and the powerful, the people that we perhaps envy, that is an inevitable part of life in these last days for true followers of Christ.

But he reminds us, doesn't he, remember that a great reversal is coming, the judge is coming, the Lord of hosts, the judge of all, he's coming and he will judge all justly.

[12 : 21] So he comes to the end of his letter, the end of chapter 5 and concludes just as he began it with a repeat prescription in the same way. Keep walking in the divine wisdom from above in all the contrasting circumstances of life.

Keep looking forward to glory with perseverance, he says in verses 7 to 12. Suffering, yes, is real, but God is faithful. He's full of mercy and compassion.

That's his purpose for you through it all. And keep looking upward in the meantime to God in prayer. We saw that last time. Sin is very real, yes, but God is forgiving.

So come back and be healed. And then finally in the very last two verses is his closing command and he's saying keep also looking outwards to your brothers and sisters to preserve them because people do wonder.

But there is a way back. So bring others back also. Now those last two verses are just very easy to skip over.

[13 : 28] But in fact, actually they encapsulate James' whole purpose in writing. He wants us to see those who are wandering away and he wants us to make sure that the danger that they're wandering into they'll be rescued from and brought back to true wisdom of true faith.

And he wants every single Christian believer to share that burden that he so obviously has because he tells us here that it's the responsibility for every single Christian to care for the souls of their brothers and sisters as well as for their own soul.

Do you remember what he said about the royal law in chapter 2 verse 8? It's to love our neighbor as ourself. So this evening I want to focus on these two verses just so we don't miss James' urgent plea and the great responsibility that he places on all of us here.

I want to look at these two verses under three headings because James points us to our real destiny as Christians which is to walk in the truth. But there's a real danger that we wander away from the truth.

And so he puts upon us a real pressing duty and that is to win others back to the truth. So first then our real destiny is to walk in the truth.

[14 : 43] There is a truth that brings us to birth from above and will save our souls and will confer upon us the crown of life and that is the truth you see he speaks of in verse 19 there.

but it must be lived out fruitfully as doers of the word. That is true to the truth not false to the truth. And that says James alone that is true faith.

That is obedient living saving faith. And all through the letter James has made very clear that the saving way of the faith as he calls it is seen not merely in profession of that faith but in practice. it is a path that we walk in. And that cannot be the path of fellowship with the world which makes us enemies of God.

It is the path no he says of walking in friendship with God like Abraham who trusted God with absolutely everything in his life even the most precious thing he had his only son Isaac the very promised seed but he put him even into the hands of God.

[15 : 50] His faith was active as James puts it in chapter 2 verse 22 it was alive it was not dead faith and therefore it was the faith that justified Abraham before God.

And far from being at odds with James the apostle Paul says exactly the same thing you'll find in Romans chapter 4 verse 13 the righteousness that is counted to someone he says is counted to those who walk notice who walk in the footsteps of the faith our father Abraham had.

These are the ones he says in Romans 6 verse 4 who walk in newness of life and in chapter 8 verse 4 who walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit.

You see walking in the truth that's the way of salvation. And friends that is just the testimony of the whole Bible from beginning to end Old Testament and New Testament.

What does the very first psalm say? Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked who stands not in the way of sinners not in the seat of scoffers but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night.

[17 : 06] His whole path in life is shaped not by the way of the world but by the word of God. And that's the truth that he's walking in.

He's meekly receiving the implanted word that is able to save his soul to use James' language. And Jesus himself speaks in exactly that same way of the truth as something that is to be walked in. Not the wide and easy way that leads to destruction but the narrow and hard way that leads to life he says in Matthew 7. So James is absolutely not out on a limb here when he talks about being a doer of the word and not a hearer only.

Lest your faith be just a deception. He's just echoing Jesus himself. He must have heard him many times saying exactly that. Don't call me Lord, Lord and not do what I command you said Jesus. And you remember when he's approached once being told that his family were near. Perhaps James was among the brothers then. And Jesus said my true brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.

[18 : 10] Quite a rebuke then to James who wasn't listening. But now that is James' constant message walk in the truth. So for James and for Paul and for Jesus for the whole Bible the message is always the same.

The faith that saves is obedient faith. It's humble reception of the lordship of God and Jesus Christ. It's walking under his rule his command.

And that's why Paul describes the worldwide mission of the gospel that he is devoted to in writing Romans in chapter 1 verse 5 as being to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations. That's what being called to belong to Jesus Christ means he's saying. The very end of the letter he says it's to live under the command of the eternal God not under the command of the errant world. So Jesus Christ is only your savior from sin and death if he is the lord of your life and you walk with him his way. Not if you wander away from him into a different path in life altogether.

[19 : 18] There are only two ways. There's his way of life walking with him or there's walking away from him which is the way of sin and death. And that is the constant gospel of the Bible from beginning to end.

The end of the Bible in Revelation 14 verse 6 it's called the eternal gospel which the angel proclaims that every nation tribe and people fear God and give him glory and worship serve him who made the earth and the sea and the springs of water the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yes says James humble yourselves before the Lord by walking in the truth and he will exalt you he will save you. I'm emphasizing that because it's just so important and foolish people have tried to say that James and Paul and others are teaching different things about the way of the faith.

Utter nonsense. Read the Bible. Paul and James and all the other New Testament writers are absolutely of one mind about the faith that saves. Read Galatians. What does Paul charge them with? Not walking in step with the truth of the gospel. Not obeying the truth and he calls them back to obey the truth and to the only thing that counts he says which is faith working through love.

[20 : 42] That alone is what fulfills God's law in a life that is walking he says not according to the flesh but according to the spirit from whom we will reap eternal life.

It's the same in Ephesians. Walk worthily of the calling you've received says Paul. Walk in the light as children of light. Same in Colossians chapter 1.

Walk in the manner worthy of the Lord bearing fruit in every good work increasing in the knowledge of God. You see that is what real faith is they're saying.

It's walking in the truth. John in his letters actually is no less emphatic. If we say we have fellowship with Christ while we walk in darkness we lie and do not do the truth he says.

But if we walk in the light as he is in the light we have fellowship with one another notice and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. That's real faith.

[21 : 41] Whoever says he abides in him must walk in the same way in which he walked he says. And this is love that we walk in his commandments.

And in his second letter and his third letter he constantly rejoices that those he's writing to are walking in the truth. I have no greater joy than to know that my children that is his converts that they are walking in the truth.

In other words they're proving themselves to be true disciples of Jesus saving their souls from death to inherit the crown of life. Little children he says let us not love in word and talk but in deed and in truth by this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our hearts before him.

You see the whole New Testament speaks with one voice doesn't it? The belief that saves through Jesus is a belief that behaves like Jesus and walks with Jesus.

It shows itself in the meekness of heavenly wisdom that bears fruit in a harvest of righteousness as James puts it in chapter 3. And if it doesn't show that he says there well it's false to the truth.

[22 : 59] It's not heavenly. It's earthly he says. It's unspiritual. In fact it's demonic he says. Because to know the truth is to know the Lord.

And he's brought us new birth by the word of truth as James puts it in chapter 1 verse 18. And we've been brought therefore into a knowledge of the truth which is as Paul says to Titus the truth that accords with godliness.

And that alone is the truth that gives us hope of eternal life. It trains us he says to renounce ungodliness and to live godly lives in the present age. It can't be any other way can it when Jesus himself tells us in John's gospel chapter 14 that he himself is the way of salvation.

I am the way and the truth and the life he says. no one comes to the father except through me. So to know the truth is to know Jesus and to be in Jesus to walk with him.

If anyone loves me he will keep my word he says. And by the same token if anyone ignores and disobeys his command well he clearly doesn't love Jesus.

[24 : 17] And that's just James' message all the way through this letter. That don't deceive yourselves he says receive and go on receiving with meekness the implanted word that is able to save your souls.

That is our real destiny to walk in the truth steadfastly all the way to the crown of life. But you see James is utterly realistic isn't he?

Just like all the other New Testament writers. He confronts reality. And he's writing to encourage but also to warn because sadly there is a real danger that is always tempting us.

A real danger to wander away from the truth. Professing Christians and indeed whole churches can and do wander away into spiritual disaster and ultimately says James to spiritual death.

Verse 19 If anyone among you wanders from the truth then verse 20 what happens if they're not brought back? Well their souls are in peril of death because a multitude of sins are not covered and so only terrible judgment can await.

[25 : 33] Now that end is a terrible one obviously but the beginning of it you see is deceptively subtle very often. It's not a sudden collapse it's a wandering a drifting into self deception.

In fact the word wonder there is translated in chapter 1 in verse 16 and other places as deceived and self deceived deceiving our hearts. And it begins in our hearts says James.

Remember when our hearts are lured and enticed by our own desires which if they're not killed will conceive and breed sin which then grows and then multiplies and when it's full grown what does he say there?

It brings forth death just as here. A terrible end. And so we must recognize that real danger and not begin even to start to wander away like that.

And most of the New Testament letters are written to warn against that kind of dangerous drift under pressure to be beguiled to be deceived by what might seem to be a better way perhaps.

[26 : 40] Even a more spiritual way. In Galatians the lure was of a more authentic and pure worship embracing what seemed to be historic orthodoxy like circumcision food laws and things like that.

In fact that lure was so powerful remember that even Peter was beguiled for a while until he was jolted back to the truth by Paul who said to him plainly you're not walking in line with the truth of God or the spirit of God.

In Colossians similarly there's peddlers of some kind of higher spirituality whatever it is. A Christ plus hidden wisdom and hidden knowledge some kind of elitist experience above that of just ordinary Christians.

But which in reality of course is then denying that Christ is the supreme and only savior that you ever need. Think about Hebrews.

It's the lure of the comfort isn't it? Of the old religion. All its external assurances. The escape from being ostracized by your Jewish friends and family. Perhaps persecuted by them.

[27 : 50] For the Corinthians there were all kinds of moral temptations. The sexual issues that were around them in their culture. And here in James he just says it's the grinding trials of many kinds.

And there's a great lure isn't there to just capitulate to the mores and the ways of the world all around. But whatever the circumstances such lures to wander away begin with deceptive subtlety. But they always end being deadly serious. It leads to a multitude of sins. And ultimately says James to the death of the soul.

It's not accidental. It's not inadvertent. It's the result of allowing sinful desires to germinate, to breed, to multiply.

And then it's too late. Alec Mateer in his commentary has a very telling passage where he says that the proof of this kind of deadly serious progression is actually visible in the very society in which we live.

[29 : 04] Listen to what he says. Going back no further than the memory of the average middle-aged person will carry us, we've seen the professing churches progressively distancing themselves from a serious recognition of the authority of the Bible.

More and more we've witnessed people in leading ecclesiastical positions denying central Christian truth, departing from Christian morality, and yet continuing in office as official teachers of the church.

Correspondingly, he says, society has withdrawn from anything but a vague folk attachment to Christian sentiment. Sunday school attendance has plummeted from that which we remember in the late 40s and early 50s.

Its descending graph has been matched by the rising graph of juvenile delinquency just as the church's abandonment of biblical truth has been matched by the increasingly open licentious and lascivious behavior of adolescent and adult lifestyles.

Truth and life belong together. There is a way of life which matches and which grows out of the truth that is in Jesus and which cannot be had any other way.

[30 : 16] It's one of the crowning follies of the present time that people think they can have Christian standards without Christian convictions. But it's beaten into second place by the folly of church leaders who think they can deny or acquiesce in the denial of biblical truth and still maintain in the church and in society at large Christian moral virtues.

Well that was written in 1985. And just think how much further down the road of ecclesiastical disaster and national decline we are today. And of course as Christians we do have a duty to our society.

We do have a duty also to the wider professing church. But above all within the local church as Matthias says we dare not treat truth and life as negotiable.

We've got to be realistic and we've got to be says James ready to act. And the New Testament is full of examples that show that people do wonder and they do carry other people away with them. We heard of Hymenaeus last Sunday morning in 1st and 2nd Timothy who made shipwreck of the faith along with others. And they were withered weren't they by foolish speculations. By all kinds of babble that leads people into ungodliness.

[31 : 38] And remember Paul said it spreads like gangrene. It poisons others unstoppably. Destroys the faith of many says Paul. And Paul said of Hymenaeus' sidekick Alexander that he did great harm to the apostles' ministry.

So these things happen. Even in churches begun by apostles. Even with converts of apostles. Even people trained for ministry by the apostles. Which I suppose is a comfort when some that we perhaps bring to faith or even train and bring into ministry swerve off in a similar way and get lost in vain discussions and theological oddities and things that cripple their ministry.

It's not new. It's been around since the beginning. But it's a warning too isn't it? Because it happens. And Paul says it happens especially to young men.

That's who Paul's dealing with. And he says you need to know that you're at risk. So flee youthful passions. He's not talking about sexual passions. He's talking about theological passions. The things that breed quarrels and ignorant controversies.

flee that kind of destructive danger says Paul and pursue well pursue what? Pursue righteousness and faith and love and peace along with all who call on the Lord with a pure heart.

[33 : 05] In other words he's saying get over your noxious theological hobby horses and start actually just behaving like a real Christian who loves the Lord and loves other Christians and wants to live at peace with them and help them and encourage them.

not pull them down. That's real faith. But you're in danger he says of wandering away into sin and death. And that's what James is dealing with here.

There is a real danger says the New Testament. People can and they do wander from the truth.

Now that is not to deny of course God's electing grace God's sovereign hand upon his own.

Nor is it to erode the assurance of true faith. But friends the New Testament teaches us that we are kept in the faith by heeding God's warnings to us.

The same Paul who said to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1 that God is faithful and that he will sustain them to the end guiltless on the day of the Lord Jesus Christ is the same Paul who a few chapters later on warns them and says if any of you think you're standing firm take heed lest you fall.

[34 : 22] The Hebrews writer who tells us at the end of chapter 1 that God's angels minister to those who are to inherit salvation goes right on in almost the next verse to say don't drift from that salvation.

Don't neglect such a great salvation. And in the next chapter to say don't you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin because we share in Christ if we hold our original confidence firm to the end. So today if you hear his voice don't harden your heart. We need to receive God's word today. We need to have faith today.

Yesterday's faith is not sufficient is what he's saying. And God's ways of warning us are the means of guarding our souls and graciously keeping our souls because he is stirring up always that faith that saves us.

And that's what James is doing all the way through his letter as we've seen. God has brought you to faith, to birth by his word of truth. It's all God's gift that's come down from above he says in chapter 1.

[35 : 35] But he goes right on to say you've got to keep receiving that truth meekly. living it, hearing it, and doing it. That's the faith that's able to save your soul.

There's no salvation and there's no assurance possible if you're deceiving yourself. And you need to know that your heart is deceitful.

And you need to know that the devil is active. So fear God, he says. Flee the devil. Draw near to God. Humble yourselves today and every day.

And he will exalt you. He will save you. But don't drift. Don't drift. Hence why here in chapter 5 he's saying keep looking forward.

Keep looking up to God in penitent prayer. Seek his forgiveness. God hears prayer. He will restore you. So come back to him daily. keep yourselves in the love of God.

[36 : 38] That's the urgent plea of Jude isn't it in his letter. That letter begins and ends by telling us that we're kept by the power of God for Jesus Christ. God is able to keep you.

But all through the middle of the letter he's saying keep yourself in the grace and mercy of God. God is sovereign. The Bible teaches us but God makes us responsible to respond with real faith to keep ourselves from wandering.

And what James is doing here you see he's extending that and saying we're not just to keep ourselves but we're to keep one another keep others also. We have a real duty he says that's the final thing to win back to the faith those who are wandering.

We have a responsibility to keep one another on the path of life and to rescue people back from the path of disaster. We are our brothers and our sisters keeper is what he's saying.

If the command in verses 13 to 18 is come back and be healed of your sin then the clear call to all of us here in verses 19 and 20 is to bring back to spiritual health and restoration.

[37 : 48] We must care for others' lives because it really is a matter of life and death if they begin to wander away. That's the truth. And James is clearly talking here not just about bringing back into the full life of the church but into the safety of Christ's saving life which is the only true life.

Anyone can wander he says. So someone must bring them back. Notice it's not the elders' job. Do you notice that? It's anyone.

It's everyone's duty because we are our brothers' keepers. brothers' brothers. You might remember years ago when we studied Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 22 there are all those commands about what we're to look after of our brothers.

Even their animals. Even their donkeys if they get lost. We're to have so much care for other people's lives that we're to make sure there's parapets around roofs and roof terraces just in case somebody should fall and injure themselves.

So much are we to care for their life. Well how much more are we to care for their eternal safety. Their eternal life. Jesus himself warns doesn't he what a terrible thing it is to cause others to stumble into sin.

[39 : 07] Read Matthew chapter 18. Better to have a millstone around your neck and be drowned in the sea than to do that. But no he says you're to be like Jesus himself the great shepherd who saves those lost sheep.

Even the ones who stumble themselves away into sin. 99 safe in the fold is not comfort enough for the Lord Jesus. If even one is out wandering and lost he does not want that one to perish.

And that's a challenge friends isn't it because especially in quite a large church it's easy and I suppose it's natural it's not wrong is it to be rejoicing on those who are safe in the fold.

To rejoice at others coming in and finding salvation in among us that is wonderful. But we're also to care for and bring back the wandering ones. Tasker says in his commentary no duty laid upon Christians is more in keeping with the mind of their Lord or more expressive of Christian love than the duty of reclaiming the backslider.

And that is pastoral care isn't it? Being like the shepherd. Shepherding back into the fold those who are wandering. Sometimes people ask who's responsible for pastoral care?

[40 : 29] How does it work in our church? Well here's the Bible's answer. We're all responsible. All of us to bring back our brothers and sisters and to keep doing it again and again.

As another writer puts it this is just church discipline. Church discipline is the training of the church by the church. That is exactly how the whole New Testament sees these things. We're to keep one another in the faith and love of Christ.

But if we're to do that then obviously we have to make that possible don't we for one another?

That's why we have church membership as we call it. That's just a public commitment that we make to one another all together to share in that relationship of care.

That's what Christian fellowship means. That word just means sharing in life. It's a mutual commitment to that. That's what it means to be part of a church. That's why we can't, as Hebrews tells us, we can't neglect meeting together.

We must go on meeting together. We must go on encouraging one another daily. You will make it very, very hard for others to keep you from wondering if you distance yourself from others, if you don't meet regularly with your Christian brothers and sisters in the church every Sunday or midweek gatherings.

[41 : 59] In a large church it's so helpful, isn't it, to have smaller groups like that of meaningful relationships. Three quarters of our members are thankfully in small groups, growth groups, and that is the most obvious place to keep others and to be kept yourself.

some can't manage that because of age or infirmity or other life circumstances and so on. That's why we have community teams to make sure that no one is overlooked. But there's only so much that you can organize and structure for, isn't there?

And if somebody constantly distances themselves from every such effort, well, they are putting themselves in real peril. Real peril.

And of course, all of that kind of care works far best if it's natural, if it's informal, if we all take seriously that duty that we have, and it is a clear duty, says James, to care for one another.

If any one of you wanders from the truth, someone bring him back is the command. But how? How do we do that? Well, first by prayer.

[43 : 10] We saw that in verses 16 to 18. Prayer is powerful, and God does answer prayer. Pray for one another, says verse 16, that you may be healed. But also, we need to pursue the wanderer, don't we?

It does take personal effort, striving, like the great shepherd himself, seeking the lost sheep. Paul talks that way in 1 Corinthians 9 about doing everything in his power to win others, to save others. That's what we're to do, says James. God is sovereign, yes, but he has sovereignly made us responsible for each other. And so we must pray for one another, we must pursue those who are wandering away.

But not harshly, we're to do it like Jesus. Notice how tender James is here. My brothers again, he entreats them. That's the family of love and of care, isn't it?

Paul says the same at the end of Galatians, in Galatians 6, my brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.

[44 : 21] It needs a spiritual person to do that, he says. To do it gently and not harshly. That will be someone, won't it, who knows that there but for God's grace, it may very well be where they would be.

In fact, Paul goes right on to say there, keep watch on yourself lest you also be tempted. It's just realism. So gently, not harshly, but not soft either because the situation is serious, it's dangerous, deadly dangerous.

Jude talks similarly, doesn't he, about showing mercy to those who die, but others snatching them, snatching them out of the fire is his language. It's very easy, isn't it, to hope somebody else will get involved so that you don't have to in these situations.

But if somebody's dying in a fire, you can't hang around, can you, waiting for that to happen? And remember, the Lord has rescued us. How can we not cherish the need to rescue others?

There's a lovely verse in Luke's gospel, chapter 22, verse 32, where Jesus is predicting Peter's denial before it happens and telling him that nevertheless he's prayed for him so that his faith won't fail utterly, that Satan won't have him.

[45 : 56] And he says this to Peter, he says, when you've turned again, same word that James uses here, translated, bring back. When you've been brought back, strengthen your brothers.

Strengthen your brothers. See, it's the one who knows the weakness and wandering of his own heart who can strengthen his brothers, isn't it?

Because he can share the same grace of God that brought him back and strengthened him so often. I love the hymn that says this, prone to wonder, Lord, I feel it.

Prone to leave, the Lord I love. But oh, to grace, how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be. Let that grace now like a fetter bind my wandering heart to thee.

And, James would add another line, and to your wandering brother or sister also. To bring them back the same way. It's a great responsibility, isn't it, for all of us, my brothers and sisters.

[47 : 10] But what a great reward also to be part of the covering of a multitude of sins. Oh, the blessedness, says the psalmist, of the one whose sin is covered.

But it's a blessing wonderfully shared, isn't it? There's great joy in sharing in someone being restored. Think of the joy in the father's house and that wonderful party when the prodigal returned. Because it blesses us, doesn't it, so wonderfully, to share in that joy when the wanderer comes back. And James says it's a ministry we're all called to.

church. It deflects Satan and defeats Satan and all his minions. It advances the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's that ministry of the craftsmen that Felix was sharing with us on Wednesday evening from the prophet Zechariah, building the temple of the Lord, shepherding the flock of Christ, our king.

That's shepherding, isn't it? That's pastoral care. It's not the task of the pastors and teachers in the church. It's the task of the whole church. Paul is just as clear, isn't he, in Ephesians chapter 4.

[48 : 28] What's the job of the pastors and teachers? To equip all the saints for the work of ministry. That's how the body grows to maturity, he says, when each member is doing their work.

Everyone caring for and keeping one another. praying for one another. Forgiving one another when we wrong one another. Bringing back one another when we wander.

That's how the church of Jesus Christ is built. That's how he forms his precious bride. And so James says here in this letter, we fulfill the royal law when we truly love our neighbor as ourself. God's that is speaking and acting as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty that liberated us. That's how a church resists the devil so it has to flee from the midst.

That's a church that is humbled so that it will be exalted by the Lord Jesus himself. love. Because that's the faith that is walking in the truth.

[49 : 46] Not wandering far away from it. And that's the church that will win others to the truth. And even win back those who have wandered away so that they will find at last the crown of life.

That, friends, is James' message. That is the divine wisdom which will prevent and even restore us from all dangerous wandering.

So together let's ask the Lord to fill us with that wisdom from above which he gives generously without reproach. But we have to ask him for it with undivided hearts.

So let's do that as we pray. Let's pray. Almighty God, who shows to them that are in error the light of thy truth to the intent that they may return into the way of righteousness, grant unto all of us that we may turn away from things contrary to our profession and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.