“Witnessing to Those Who Stray”

James 5:19-20

**19-20: “My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you strays from the truth and someone turns him back, let him know that the one who has turned a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.”**

Good morning! I hope that all of you are feeling well and are ready to open the Scriptures together. Today we are completing our study through the Epistle of James by discussing the final two verses in the Epistle. Next week we will have a message to conclude what we have learned in the Epistle of James and then we will transition to our next primary book of study, the prophetic Old Testament book of Daniel. The topic we are discussing today is very important, especially with all that is going on around us in the world today. Our goal today is to equip each other with the tools necessary to help fellow believers in Christ who may have strayed from the truth and need to be restored. We must remember as we discuss this that any of us could fall into the trap of false doctrine, so the message today will also help us to stay in line with the truth of Scripture so that we are not misled by the false doctrines that are spreading throughout the world today. I also need to say that our goal is not to attack people, our goal is to be loving and help those who are being manipulated by the power of Satan so they may be restored in the truth.

These verses teach us that it is very likely that people will stray from the truth. We see this being very prevalent in our world today. The truth of the Gospel is being distorted in many ways, which is also having a great impact on how people are being taught the way to be saved through Jesus Christ. There is so much deception and false teaching in the world today that it sometimes feels like it is almost impossible to discern between the truth and falsehood.

Also, James is mentioning that those straying from the truth are those that are members of the church. We need to remember that James is instructing his readers that they are commanded to live out the faith they have in Christ. One way they can do this is by holding each other accountable to the faith they all profess. Accountability in the church is one of the reasons why the church is so important in the world today. Christians gather to worship the Lord every week, to share gifts for the work of the kingdom, to pray for the needs of all and to equip each other for the work of evangelism. For all these things to happen the members of the church need to hold each other accountable for the faith and make certain they are heeding the teachings of Scripture.

In the message today we will be discussing three questions: 1. In what ways are believers in Christ today straying from the truth? 2. How should the church work to turn those people back to the truth who have strayed? 3. What is the benefit for the church when it turns back strayed believers to the truth?

*1. In what ways are believers in Christ today straying from the truth?*

 As we begin to discuss this question the first step is for us to define what truth is. If we do not have a concrete definition of what truth is then we will not be able to explain what it means to stray from it. According to the Oxford dictionary the definition for truth is “that which is true or in accordance with fact or reality.” So, the Oxford dictionary defines truth as facts that align with reality. What this means is that for something to be considered the truth it must be real. Is this the way that truth is defined in our culture today? Unfortunately, no, the culture today does not define truth as facts that align with reality, truth has become subjective (or opinion) meaning that the subject, or the individual, determines what is right or wrong. When many people are asked what truth is, they will say that truth is whatever you feel is right for you. Therefore, every person defines truth to be whatever they think is right for them. This is a very dangerous position to take because we are seeing truth becoming very warped and not in conjunction with reality.

 If this view of truth continues towards its rational conclusion then what happens is that there becomes a very confused perspective on what truth really is. If truth can be determined by the individual opinions of every person, then really there is no such thing as an objective standard to establish absolute truth. When there is no standard for truth, then everything becomes permissible meaning that no one can claim to be either right or wrong. This is the view that many people in our culture today have regarding truth. They want to have their own opinions validated by others and do not want to have their views challenged, so what the culture has done is basically say that all views and opinions, even all religions, are equal and have the same validity.

 In what ways have believers in Christ been manipulated by this modern-day view of truth? One of the most dangerous teachings that is found in some churches is the teaching that all religions are equal and will eventually lead that person to God. This teaching has infiltrated the church in many ways, so many that we do not have the time to discuss them all. Today, for the sake of time, we will discuss two examples. Many churches today have embraced new perspectives regarding God that are not in line with the teachings of Scripture. One is the view that God loves people the way they are and that He has made them a certain way, which makes Him wrong for condemning them to hell for their sin. The objection is usually worded this way: How can God send someone to hell for committing a sin when He was the One who created them to be that way? This question assumes that the person was created a certain way and therefore God is really to blame for them committing that sin. This objection usually comes up when discussing sexual sins such as homosexuality or gender alterations. The argument is that God is unjust for sending someone to hell for that sin because they have been made to be that way. This view is not the truth because it does not align with reality. Scripture teaches clearly that God is holy, so He does not create sinful beings. We are sinful because of the sinful nature we have inherited from Adam. Therefore, this objection does not stand according to Scriptural teaching.

 This subjective view of truth has also resulted in a new form of Christianity that has spread throughout many churches all over the world. This is called Progressive Christianity. What exactly is Progressive Christianity? I will give you a definition that I hope will explain it thoroughly. Progressive Christianity is the belief that Christian faith can and must evolve to meet the changing needs of society. This theological system asserts, for example, that the Bible, as it has originally been written, does not address the needs of society today so it must be altered or adjusted to meet the needs of a changing society. This is very similar to the historical movement in American History that was known as progressivism. For society to progress changes needed to be made to the traditional ways that things were done. This resulted in changing attitudes towards gender, sexuality, the structure of the family and overall morality including truth. The main idea in all of this is that there must be changes made to the original system since that system is no longer valid or is outdated.

 This Progressive Christianity embraces many worldviews that do not align with the teachings of Scripture. This system is so dangerous because in some ways it sounds like a traditional view of Scripture, but then it twists other aspects of the faith. This has allowed it to infiltrate many churches over the past century. For example, Progressive Christians do state that they believe in the concept of the Trinity, with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all coexisting in the Godhead. Where they would differ from orthodox (or traditional) Christianity is in the view that the Bible is the inspired, holy and infallible Word of God. They accept many of the teachings that in Scripture that discuss loving others and turning the other cheek, however many of them reject the Old Testament because of the brutality of the conquest of Canaan and some teachings in Scripture regarding lifestyles such as homosexuality, the sanctity of the life of the unborn and marriage. When the Biblical teachings regarding these topics conflict with their own desires, this is when they will depart from Scripture.

 I wanted to bring this to your attention because this is the kind of swaying from the faith that James is discussing in verse 19. We as the body of Christ are not to treat other Christians who have fallen into this false teaching as the enemy. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the people in the church at Ephesus **“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (6:12).** Our enemy is Satan and the dark spiritual forces that are manipulating many Christians to accept these false doctrines. James is instructing his readers to lovingly make their fellow believers know that they have been taken advantage of and that they are being misled. When we encounter a fellow Christian who embraces these teachings we need to be loving and not harsh. We also need to remember that had it not been for the Holy Spirit working in our lives we would still be lost. We need to ask questions, get connected with them in their life and share with them the truth of the gospel message. When we take the time to invest in others, continually proclaim the truth of Scripture and speak in truth with love we can show them that we love them and are not looking upon them as our enemy. James is instructing his readers and us who are studying this epistle to use our energy to help those who gone astray get back to the truth.

*2. How should the church work to turn those people back to the truth who have strayed?*

In our second question today, we are going to discuss how Christians can be there for and help those who have been taken in by false teachings such as Progressive Christianity. Just like I said previously, we need to view our brothers and sisters as those who have been manipulated by demons and Satan, not as our enemy. Therefore, when we invest in others to lovingly help them to get back in line with the truth of Scripture we need to do so keeping that in mind.

 In answering this question, I wanted to share with you a resource that I have found to be very helpful in my studies and I hope that it will help you as well. Gregory Koukl is an apologist who has a technique for sharing the faith with an unbeliever. His method is designed to help people witness to those who are not in the faith using reason, logic and methods that will spark communication. The methods proposed by Greg can also help Christians witness to other believers so that they can help bring them back from error. Let us look at the steps we can use to help someone come back to the faith when they have strayed:” **Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Your speech must always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person” (Col. 4:5-6).** Even though the Apostle Paul is talking about how to witness to non-believers we can still use these instructions as we work with fellow believers who have strayed. There are three major components to these verses. The first is that when we interact with a strayed believer we need to “conduct ourselves with wisdom.” Paul is saying that before we engage in these conversations with others we need to do our homework by being familiar with the topic we will be discussing. I have to say that if someone wanted to sit down with me and have a discussion regarding physics they would not get very much out of me. I have not studied that topic much and therefore the conversation would not be very fruitful. How can we be prepared for such opportunities? Daily Bible reading, staying in communication with God through prayer, regularly attending the gathering of God’s people will all provide us with the wisdom we need for those interactions.

 Secondly, Paul instructs his readers to have grace in their speech. This means that when we have discussions with others we are to be loving and gracious. Noone wants to have a discussion with another person who is rude or obnoxious. The Apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:15 that when we share our faith with others we need to do so with gentleness and respect. So, when we engage with a fellow believer who has strayed we need to speak with them lovingly.

 Finally, our speech needs to be seasoned with salt. This means that when we speak to them the conversation needs to have a savor to it. In other words, it must be filled with the truth. The culture today is embracing a very bland form of truth, so when we engage with someone with the salt of God’s truth the person will see the difference and it will attract them. Just like salt gives flavor to food and preserves, we need our speech to give the life of that person flavor and help to preserve them through times of trial. If we follow the instructions of Paul we can help to bring back someone if they have stayed from the truth.

*3. What is the benefit for the church when it turns back a strayed believer to the truth?*

Now we have come to the final question we will be answering today. When someone helps another straying believer come back to the truth what is the benefit? James says in verse 20, which happens to be the last verse in the epistle, that there are two things that result. The sinners soul will be saved from death and a multitude of sins will be covered. The first thing that we need to say here is that when someone is lured into a false doctrine or teaching is that these doctrines are leading people astray and have eternal consequences. For example, for someone to claim that Scripture is not clear on marriage being a union of one man and one woman is taking the gift of marriage, as designed by God, and twisting it to fit their own desires. This is sinful because anything God has designed is holy and twisting it is making it humanly which takes away its sacredness. When man rejects the truth of Scripture he is in essence making himself God wanting to have the authority to determine right and wrong in his own eyes. We see the results of this kind of thinking in the time of the judges in Israelite history. In the last verse of Judges, we have written **“In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25).** When everyone did what was right in their own eyes this resulted in a nation that was eventually invaded and destroyed because of their unfaithfulness. There must be a standard for truth and we all know that this standard is God, who has provided for us in His Word everything we need to know to live a Godly life in honor to Him. So, the first benefit to bringing back a fellow believer who has strayed from the truth is that it will save that person’s soul from death in hell.

 The second benefit is that it will cover a multitude of sins. Once again in this verse James is speaking of restoration. When someone has come back from being strayed they will be restored in the church as well as in their relationship with God. We know that straying from the faith is something that most people face at one point in their life. Jesus acknowledged this when He spoke about the one sheep who went astray from the 99. He asked the pharisees if they would go after the lost sheep even if this took place on the Sabbath Day. In asking this question Jesus was sharing His heart for the lost. Do we have the same attitude? Are we willing to go after that one lost sheep even if that might be an inconvenience with us? The benefit to helping those who are misled is that it will result in their sins being forgiven and restoring their relationship with God. This needs to be our hearts desire as we engage with the culture today. Rather than getting upsent and frustrated with others who don’t have the same values as us we need to share our faith with them and show through our lives that when people follow God’s commands their lives can be more fulfilling, and they can find peace for the chaos in their lives.

 As we conclude today, we have been given instruction in one of the most important aspects of the Christian faith, which is evangelism. We must take the opportunities afforded to us by God to share our faith with unbelievers as well as encourage those in the faith who might have strayed from the truth. If we really love others we will tell them the truth even if that truth offends them. Loving someone and wanting them to be in God’s presence for eternity needs to trump the fear of offending them. James wants us to know that loving others in this way will lead to their salvation and will also cause others to desire to know the God of grace even more. To return to the introduction today we began by discussing what truth is. The Oxford dictionary says that truth aligns with reality. Therefore, there can only be one truth, not several. Scripture tells us that the only truth that can be known is the Lord Jesus Christ. At the Last Supper Jesus makes this very clear when He said “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me“(John 14:6). May we use every situation to honor the God who has saved us and do the work to grow His kingdom. If we really love our fellow man, we will always tell them the truth. Therefore, let us be people of the truth. Amen.