

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

**Saving a Soul from Death
James 5:19-20
Part Three**

We are presently considering **James 5:19-20**. Let us read these two verses **“My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, (20) let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.”**

As I have shared with you, these two verses form a very fitting conclusion to the epistle of James. James wrote this epistle to call professing believers to examine their faith and to make sure it was real. He was deeply concerned that no one be deceived about their salvation. He did not want professing believers who thought they were saved to come into the presence of Christ at the final judgment and hear these words, **“I never knew you, depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”**

In an attempt to do all that he could do in making sure that this would not happen, James wrote this Epistle. James in this epistle gives a series of tests by which one’s faith can be evaluated.

True saving faith is marked by a proper response to trials which we called the “Response to Trials test” in James 1:2-18.

True saving faith is marked by a proper response to the word of God which we called the “Response to the Word test” in James 1:19-27.

True saving faith is marked by a proper response to people of various social classes which we called the “Impartiality test” in James 2:1-13.

True saving faith is marked by it’s manifestation in righteous deeds which we called the “Works test” in James 2:14-26

True saving faith is marked by righteous speaking which we called the “Speech test” in James 3:1-12.

True saving faith is marked by wisdom from above which we called the “Wisdom test” in James 3:13-18.

True saving faith is marked by not being a friend of the world which we called the “Friendship with the World test” which extends from James 4:1 - 5:12.

This friendship is shown to manifest itself in four different ways in this particular section. Friendship with the world reveals itself in selfish strife in James 4:1-12, in an attitude of presumptuous self-sufficiency in business planning in James 4:13-17, in wrong reactions to experiences of injustice in James 5:1-11 and in self-serving oaths in James 5:12.

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And finally, true saving faith is marked by prayer, which we have considered in James 5:13-18.

Why did James write this epistle? James wrote this epistle to call professing believers to examine their faith and to make sure it was real. Hopefully after this examination had taken place, the vast majority of his readers would have had their faith confirmed. Hopefully after the examination of this epistle the vast majority of us have had our faith confirmed. But what about the readers either then or now who did not have their faith confirmed? What have we learned about them from **James 5:19-20**.

We learned that caring Christians can be instrumental in restoring straying brothers (V. 19). We saw this clearly in **V. 19**.

What else do we learn from **James 5:19,20**? We learn that professing believers who are restored by caring Christians are saved from death.

Let us read **James 5:19-20** again, “**My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, (20) let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.**” The reason why we cannot give up on professing believers who have strayed from the truth is because the stakes are potentially too high.

This is why James does not cut any slack to professing believers who stray from the truth when he chooses to call them “sinners” in **V. 20**. The genuineness of our faith and whether or not it is living or saving should not be evaluated on the basis of what we say but rather on the basis of what we do. If we live like sinners we should be viewed as sinners. This was the emphasis that we made in last week’s message.

If we have a son or daughter, mother or father, a friend or an acquaintance who has strayed from the truth and is no longer walking the talk, we need to view them as sinners and not give them the benefit of the doubt but rather we need to take the time and make the effort to try and turn them so that what they say and what they do are consistent. That was our emphasis last week. But if you are still hesitating to act on what we have already shared, hopefully this weekends message will give you a much greater urgency in regard to the vital role that God has given to us.

If those professing believers who are not walking according to the truth and who we should view as sinners are not turned, the reasonable expectation, though not the certainty, would be that they will experience death.

Is James referring to a physical death or to a spiritual death in respect to the professing believer who is not walking according to the truth? Certainly physical death is a possibility. What does **1 Cor. 11:28-30** say “**But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.**”

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(29) For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. (30) For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.”

The word for “sleep” is a euphemism for “physical death.” When professing believers persist in living a sinful lifestyle, there is a possibility that the consequence of that lifestyle will be physical death. And certainly “spiritual death” is also a very real possibility if a professing believer's faith is in fact, a dead faith as we have already seen in **James 2:14-26**. So we have a choice in how we interpret this word. The reference to “death” could refer either to physical or spiritual death.

Which is it? The first thing that we notice is the word “soul.” What does the passage say, **“My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, (20) let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death.”** In the book of Acts as well as in the epistles the word “soul” is sometimes used to refer to a person without making any distinction between the material or immaterial part of the individual. However in the gospels this is not the case at all. It is always used to refer to the immaterial part of man. If we understand the word in this way then we would have to conclude that James is saying that the one who turns a professing believer who is no longer walking the talk from the error of his way will save him from spiritual death.

And this fits very nicely with the theme of the epistle. Why did James write this epistle? He wrote this epistle to call professing believers to examine their faith to see whether or not their faith was truly living, genuine and saving. If they examined their faith according to the tests outlined in this epistle and found themselves walking according to the truth, they could be comforted, their faith was saving. But if they examined their “faith” according to the tests outlined in this epistle and found themselves not walking according to the truth, they certainly should be disturbed. Why? Their profession of faith has proven itself to be empty words and therefore not saving. They should therefore, unless they are turned, view themselves as unsaved and therefore facing spiritual death.

James’s reference to “death” should be understood as “spiritual death” based on the epistle’s theme and choice of words in V. 20.

All unsaved people are spiritually dead. Their human spirits are already separated from God. But the spiritual death referred to here should be understood in an eschatological sense. It is not referring to the present state, but the future state of those spiritually dead, if they are not turned, whether those people are inside or outside of the church.

Some people aspire to do great things with their lives. George Bush and Al Gore are two such men. They are putting out tremendous amounts of energy and money to pursue their aspirations. Hopefully no matter how this election is finally decided these men will be able to look back over the course of their lives and feel good about what they have accomplished. And hopefully each of us here will be able to do the same thing.

But you may say, “I will never have the opportunity to accomplish the great things that George Bush or Al Gore will be able to accomplish.” I am just a housewife, I am just an engineer, I am just a plumber, I am just a school teacher.

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Let me tell you something. Though all these things may be true we must understand first and foremost that we are ambassadors for Christ and therefore should be seeking to turn people from their sin to Jesus. We are to persistently carry out this work whether those sinners are inside or outside the church so that they may live their lives according to the truth.

If by God's grace we are able to see a sinner turned, what does God say in this passage we have done? We have saved his soul from death and covered a multitude of sins. Now that is significant. More significant than campaign finance reform? Yes. More significant than the solvency of social security? Yes. More significant than a strong national defense? Yes. I really can't think of a more significant thing that any of us can do with our lives than to be used by God in turning sinners to Jesus so that they might walk in the truth.

Many people see physical death as ending their pain. And this is certainly true of those who have a living, genuine, saving faith. Physical death will end their pain. This is not true of those who James is speaking about here in these two verses. Their death will not end their pain, in fact, it will be like jumping out of the fire into the frying pan. What will a person experience who dies without their sins being covered?

The person who dies without their sins being covered will be consciously tormented.

Initially the place of conscious torment will be in a place called "Hades" (Luke 16:19-26). Listen to **Luke 16:19-26** "Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. (20) And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, (21) and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. (22) Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. (23) And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. (24) And he cried out and said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame. (25) But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. (26) Besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.'" This initial abode of the person who dies without their sins being covered again is called "Hades." And it clearly is a place of torment. The rich man in this parable is described as being in "agony in the flame."

But this initial place of torment appears to only be a temporary abode. The final place of conscious torment will be in the "Lake of fire" (Rev. 20:11-14). Listen to **Rev. 20:11-14** "And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. (12) And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.

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(13) And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them and they were judged every one of them according to their deeds. (14) And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.” Some people are afraid of physical death but physical death which is of course a person’s first death, is nothing compared to the “second death” if their sins are in fact uncovered.

We again see in this passage the imagery of fire. We saw this in **Luke 16** and we see this again in **Rev. 20**. Are these literal flames? It certainly could be conceded that the reference to fire is figurative language. Just as we could concede that the golden streets of heaven spoken about in **Rev. 21:21** could also be figurative. But even if this point was conceded we cannot make the mistake to think that the torment being pictured in these passages is any less frightening than the figure conveys. The lake of fire is an awful destiny.

The person who dies without their sins being covered will be tormented forever (Rev. 20:10). The person who thinks that any agony that might have been experienced in Hades would be put to an end by being cast into the Lake of fire would be sorely mistaken. Listen to **Rev. 20:10** “**And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever.**” The first inhabitants of the Lake of fire are the beast and false prophet according to **Rev. 19:20** In this verse we learn that after that destruction of armies of the earth that had been deceived at the end of the Millennium, the devil himself will be thrown into the Lake of fire. What is important to note is the phrase “**And they will be tormented day and night forever.**” The purpose of the lake of fire is not to extinguish agony but to perpetuate it forever and ever and ever.

Let me ask you a question: What is the greater work, passing legislation on campaign finance reform or turning a sinner? Let me ask you a question: What is the greater work, making social security solvent or turning a sinner? Hopefully your answer will be “turning a sinner”

CONCLUSION

We are ambassadors for Christ and therefore should be seeking to turn people from their sin to Jesus. We are to persistently carry out this work whether those sinners are inside or outside the church so that they may live their lives according to the truth. And if we, by the grace of God, are privileged to see just one sinner turn, let us know this; The one who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.