

**The World According to Jim**  
**“The Wanderer”**  
**James 5:19-20**

**Introduction**

- A couple of years ago a Reuters news story out of Kolkata, India caught my attention. Hundreds of people thronged to a hospital in the eastern Indian city to see a man whose skull had fallen off his head. Not the whole skull, mind you. Doctors said a large, dead section of a 25-year-old man’s skull fell off after severe burns starved it of blood.<sup>1</sup>
- Which of us seeing that man on the street wouldn’t immediately point out his condition to him? Every single one of us, without exception, would say something; we’d do something to make sure the man received help.
- With the same seriousness and concern and care we come to the concluding words of James’ letter. James 5:19-20. Listen. *My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*
- There are times, and it happens all too frequently, when a brother or sister in Christ wanders from the fold, maimed and bloodied, headed for death and we sit in silence with nothing to say.

**Transition**

[Slide #2] James 5:19-20 says that...

**Proposition**

- **Each of us has the responsibility to bring the wanderer back**
- The responsibility for bringing back the wanderer falls to each of us—not just to the pastor. *My brothers, if one of you should wander...and someone should bring him back. Each of us has the responsibility to bring the wanderer back.*
- A friend of mine relayed the story of a young man who applied for a job as an usher at a theater in a mall. The manager asked him, "What would you do in case a fire breaks out?" The young man answered, "Don't worry about me. I'd get out okay." That's how we respond sometimes.<sup>2</sup> James says we are all ushers so to speak. It isn't enough just to get out yourself. We are all responsible for each other.
- [Slide #3] In these last two verses of the letter James describes...

**Organizational Sentence**

- **The cause and effect of spiritual wandering**

**Transition**

---

<sup>1</sup> Piece of man's skull falls off, draws crowds Wed Jul 5, 2006 7:58 AM ET By Bappa Majumdar

<sup>2</sup> *Illustration Digest* (March-April-May, 1993); submitted to preachingtoday.com by Lee Eclow, Lincolnshire, Illinois.

- [Slide #4] In the World According to Jim the cause of spiritual wandering is a **deviation from the truth**. Look at verse 19. *My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back.*

### Main Points

- Here’s the deal. A person comes to Christ. James says *one of you*. This person has at least outwardly identified with the Christian community. They’ve connected and become involved. Then something happens. Slowly, bit by bit, they start disconnecting from the body. They start withdrawing. Maybe they stop reading their bible. I’ve seen this happen so many times it’s scary. They become less committed to Christ. Call it backsliding. Call it drifting. Call it what you will. Before the person realizes what’s happened they’re gone—they’re lost. Unless someone reaches them.
- James says this person, this wanderer, has drifted *from the truth*. Spiritual wandering is directly related to losing a grip on the truth. The two are intricately connected.
- The word *wander* is normally translated “deceive.” Sometimes it can mean to lose course and go astray; it’s a navigational term that describes a ship going off its course and being lost.<sup>3</sup> And it’s serious business. Jesus uses the word in Matthew 24:5. *For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many.* Paul uses it in 2 Timothy 3:13 when he speaks of *evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived*. Peter uses the word in 2 Peter 2:15 to describe Balaam’s error. *They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness.*
- The effect of this wandering is so serious—we’ll look at the effect in a second, the wandering James pictures here is, I think, a wandering that leads to apostasy; a complete rejection of the faith. That’s the course the person has set for herself by wandering from the truth. And it may start out innocently enough. But as it progresses it causes the person to apostatize. As one commentator put it, “One error and sin gives rise to another, just as circles do in the water; and whoever begins to wander goes farther.”<sup>4</sup> The end result is a complete rejection of the faith.
- **Clark Pinnock**. Do you know that name? A number of years ago Clark Pinnock was one of the most respected evangelical theologians in the country. He was a professor at the Free Church seminary in Chicago—Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He mentored my seminary advisor Grant Osborne. However, Pinnock began to wander doctrinally. Pinnock, sadly enough, is now more known for his theological wanderings than anything else. I remember my advisor almost in tears telling us the story of his mentor’s wanderings.
- We may not be theologians, but here’s the deal. Every single one of us can wander from the truth we have grasped. This was evident at my ordination council this past Wednesday; having been barraged with important theological question after theological question. It’s so easy to become rusty. Things you once knew, you forget. Truths you once grasped clearly become more difficult to grasp. The key question for all of us is this. Are you losing a grip on the truth?

---

<sup>3</sup> Baker and Ellsworth, p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> Manton, p. 358.

- It's not without reason Paul urges the younger Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:16 to *Watch your life and doctrine closely*. Paul then adds; *persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers*. Our connection to the truth affects how we live. Paul says as much in Titus 1:1 when he writes *Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness*. If we lose our grasp on the truth we are in danger of losing godliness. To wander from the truth is to wander from godliness. Or as [J.A. Motyer](#) puts it, "It is one of the crowning follies of the present time that people think they can have Christian standards without Christian convictions."<sup>5</sup>
- These verses are so critical because most times the wanderer doesn't know of their wanderings. Again, that's why the word is so closely tied to the word deceived. The wanderer needs someone to bring them back. And that responsibility falls to each of us.
- If you are confident of what you believe, great. If you are holding firm to the truth what about the people around you—the people not here who used to be here—who should be here? Do you know someone who's wandered? You have a responsibility to bring the wanderer back. *Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'* 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.<sup>6</sup>

### Transition

[Slide #5] Look at verse 20 for the [effect](#) of wandering. *Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins*. Unless someone intervenes, unless you intervene, in the World According to Jim, [spiritual wandering leads to spiritual death](#).

- [Ravi Zacharias](#) once told the story of Charlie Peace. Charlie Peace was a criminal in England, and on the day he was being taken to his execution, listened to a minister reading from the Word. And when Peace found out the minister was reading about heaven and hell, he looked at the preacher and said, "Sir, if I believed what you and the church of God say, and even if England were covered with broken glass from coast to coast, I would walk over it on hands and knees and think it worthwhile living just to save one soul from an eternal hell like that."<sup>7</sup>
- Have we forgotten the seriousness of what's at stake? If the end result of spiritual wandering is spiritual death then why aren't we more urgent? Day after day, week after week, month after month glide by. And yet the wanderer doesn't stop to wait for us to get our act together. I'm reminded of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:11. *Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men*. Since we know the effect of spiritual wandering, we try to persuade men and women. Or as James says in [verse 20](#), *turn a sinner from the error of his way*.

<sup>5</sup> Motyer, p. 210-11.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 15:4-7

<sup>7</sup> Ravi Zacharias, "The Lostness of Humankind," Preaching Today, Tape No. 118.

- In God’s economy, salvation comes only through faith alone in Christ alone. But more often than not, knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness and spiritual life comes as a direct result of our effort and prayers and involvement in that person’s life. *Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.* Obviously, we have no inherent power to save or to cover over sin ourselves. Only the shed blood of Christ can free a person from the bondage to sin. Only the Holy Spirit can impart new spiritual life. But somehow, as [Sophie Laws](#) puts it, “the reclamation of an errant member of the community has far-reaching consequences: it achieves the salvation of a soul from death, and forgiveness of sins.”<sup>8</sup> When the wanderer returns there’s complete forgiveness of sins, there’s life. Somehow, for some reason God chooses to do only what he can do through us, through weak, imperfect jars of clay. And for that he is to be praised.
- One question these verses cause us to ask is this, what is the true identity of the wanderer? Is the wanderer an unbeliever? Or is the wanderer a Christian? While I personally think it’s the former, in practice, it matters little. Even though I believe scripture teaches that once a person is regenerated she can never be lost, I realize, as someone once said, “God’s own children may error, and dangerously for a while.”<sup>9</sup> In those cases, our response is to bring the wandering Christian back by lovingly showing them the error of their way, by urging them to repent and return to Christ.
- If, however, the wanderer is a professing Christian, whose faith is not really genuine, and by the way, the churches in this town are full of people just like that; the response is the same. We urge them to repent, turn away from sin to trust the living Christ. Because only God knows the heart and because outward appearances are misleading, regardless of the wanderer’s true identity, our response is the same. We work to bring the wanderer back.
- *Suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*<sup>10</sup>
- My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God's truth, don't write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God.<sup>11</sup> **Each of us has the responsibility to bring the wanderer back.**

## Conclusion

- Darold Beir’s testimony.

---

<sup>8</sup> Laws, p. 238.

<sup>9</sup> Manton, p. 359.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 15:8-10

<sup>11</sup> James 5:19-20 from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*.