

**JAMES 5:19-20**  
**“WHOEVER TURNS A SINNER...”**

First, my son calls into the nationally syndicated Christian radio station called “K-Love,” and he wins his very own GPS system. Then his name is drawn from all the GPS winners around the country, and he wins an all-expense paid trip to see a concert by a famous Christian singer. My son is having a rather good year.

But back to the GPS system. We used it a few weeks ago when we drove to Pennsylvania for a couple of college visits. We even named “her,” since she has a deep British female voice. She is very useful. Nothing much is flat or straight in western Pennsylvania, so it was good to have her telling us exactly where to go.

But she could get a little irritating, too. When a GPS has mapped a path for you, it is not happy when you stray from the path. At one point, when I knew we would be leaving the path to stop for gas, I told Taylor to turn her off, because I didn’t want to hear her correcting me.

Today, we end our journey through the book of James. We have used the theme, “Real Life. Real Faith.” In his usual direct way, James closes his inspired words with a call for God’s people to really care for each other as we live out real life with real faith. This care includes correcting each other when we wander off the path of godliness. Sometimes we need to do the correcting, and sometimes we need to be corrected.

But just as that GPS voice can be irritating, such correction can be irritating. It is hard for us to follow these words - whether we are giving or receiving this correction. Yet that is God’s call to his people today. Let’s wrap our minds around James’ words this way: We don’t like this. But God wants this. So let’s do this.

**WE DON’T LIKE THIS.** James writes of wandering from the truth. He mentions the error of this person’s way. He could be thinking of false teaching, but James is all about action and doing, so he is probably thinking of ungodly living. Intentionally or not, consciously or not, someone has wandered from the path of following Jesus. He or she professes faith, but is failing to express that faith in daily life.

James then writes of bringing this person back, and turning a sinner from that error. He calls for a church culture where we enter each other’s lives with words of truth, and direct each other to new and godly paths. But we don’t like this. Why? The reasons are cultural and relational.

*CULTURALLY*, we live in a culture that consistently preaches personal rights and vigorously pushes personal freedom. You live the way you want to live, and I will live the way I want to live, and we will live and let live. Or, more crudely, you keep your nose out of my business, and I will keep my nose out of your business. As we think of our government, this is a great blessing. We rejoice in our personal freedoms - especially the freedom to worship.

But the church is not supposed to follow all of the patterns of the culture. The church is to be a different kind of place, with different values than the culture. We are in a community, and we are to be involved in each other’s lives. Yet we are such creatures of our culture that just as we are irritated by GPS voices telling us we are off the path, and just as we are bothered when the government chips away at our rights, and just as we are offended when a neighbor offers an opinion about how we should live, we resent other believers’ involvement in our lives. We are culturally conditioned against giving or receiving correction.

*RELATIONALLY*, we reflect this, too. Because of our cultural values, we know that any sort of confrontation about right and wrong will probably be unpleasant. Think about it. What will happen if you speak to a co-worker about his abusive words? Or what will happen if you ask your neighbor to put his dog inside by 11 PM? Young people, what will happen if you go to a friend and tell him he should stop fooling around with drugs? You know this will be a test of the relationship, and you do not want to do it.

We like our relationships to be comfortable. As long as everything goes smoothly, as long as we are all content, we don’t want to rock the boat. We go through the motions, we play our roles, and if we can get through that business day or that holiday or that game day or that Lord’s Day without a big scene, we are happy.

Think of it this way: when was the last time you shied away from saying something to someone about

some problem, because you knew saying something would lead to some sort of disagreement? Or think of it this way: when was the last time someone said something to you about some problem, and you reacted badly, which hurt the relationship in some way?

Author Ken Sande writes about “peacefaking.” Something is wrong. Someone is wrong. But no one wants to say anything, because as creatures of our culture, we want to do all we can to avoid any problems in every relationship.

We don’t like this. **BUT GOD WANTS THIS.** “My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins.” Bring him back. Turn him from error. Say something. Do something. Intervene in the life of that brother or sister in Jesus Christ. And what will happen? This saves from death, and this covers over sins.

*THIS SAVES FROM DEATH.* The text in the original language includes the word “soul.” So James is saying that someone is wandering along a path that will lead to eternal death. Maybe this person has professed faith in Jesus, but his or her life is far from reflecting that profession. Maybe it is one serious thing, or maybe it is a series of little things. Maybe it is like the Parable of the Sower. The truth of God has been planted within this person, but it seems to be rootless, or the worries and temptations of life are choking it. The end of this wandering is hell.

Do you see that the stakes are high here? Yes, we believe that God sovereignly saves people by his grace. You cannot save someone. But last week we learned that God does his sovereign work through the prayers of his people. Now we discover that God does his sovereign work through the correction of his people. He calls his people to be his means of saving people from eternal death, as they speak to each other about wandering from the truth.

This saves from death. *THIS COVERS OVER SINS.* This is a puzzling phrase. We wonder, whose sins are being covered - the person doing the correcting, or the person being corrected? It makes most sense to say that James is thinking of the sins of the person who is wandering.

But what does it mean to “cover over” sins? Surely it does not mean that somehow if I speak to you about how you are wandering, my speaking will somehow secure God’s forgiveness of your sins. Surely it does not mean that somehow I can get you to hide your sins from God.

We cannot be sure. But think of it this way. If I bring you back to a life lived for God, if I turn you from the error of your way, I am doing a righteous thing. I am doing the work of a God of righteousness. He wants to see righteous living from his people. So at least we can say that when this process happens, when one Christian turns another Christian from wandering and leads that Christian back to righteous living, God is honored by this newly righteous living. In that sense, the sins are “covered.” We don’t see them anymore. Instead, we see what is good and just and right in God’s people.

Author Henry Cloud tells the story of a meeting between business people. One person in the room was an experienced business leader. Another person was a young superstar in the business world. The older guy looked at the younger guy and said, “Want some feedback?” Cloud writes, “He said it in a way that left you wondering whether he was going to give sage advice or rail at the young man for being out to lunch in some way.” The young man answered, “By all means. Give me a gift.”

That is the attitude we must cultivate, whether we are giving or receiving correction! As we live with each other in the body of Christ, we are wrestling over eternal matters. Our lives today are supposed to honor God, and we are on a journey to eternity. When we go to each other with godly correction, this is a gift.

It is a gift for you to say to me, “Brother, I am deeply concerned about what I saw on your computer.” It is a gift for me to say to you, “Sister, I hate to see bitterness growing like a weed in your soul.” It is a gift for you to say to me, “Friend, that is not the way you should treat the people under your care.” It is a gift for me to say to you, “Young person, I wonder why you seem to have no interest in the Word of God.” It is a gift for you to say to me, “Brother, you are on a path that will lead to your destruction in this life and the life to come.”

It is a gift. We don't like this. But God wants this. He wants this because sin is real, and hell is real, and life and death are real, and he longs for those who profess faith in him, to express that real faith in real life. He has chosen to create a community called the church, where people bring back wandering sinners from the error of their ways.

**SO LET'S DO THIS.** Let's strive to create a culture of this. Let's start even now. We will have a second greeting time, and you can turn to the person nearest to you, and you can tell him or her exactly what you think of them. You can get out the steamroller, and roll right over them with all you have ever wanted to say about how they should live!

Well, maybe not. How do we do this, without overdoing this? Here are two ideas.

First, **MAKE SURE THE SIN IS SIN.** If we are not careful, we will not create a culture of "speaking the truth in love." We will create a culture of nitpicking. We do this when we fail to see the difference between personal preference and personal opinion, and sin.

Let's go back to that word "freedom." In our walk with Jesus Christ, we have much freedom in what Paul calls "disputable matters." We are different, and it is okay that we are different. We will have different preferences and opinions about dress, about music, about schooling, about drinking alcohol, about Bible translations, about the details of how we spend Sunday, about how we use our money, about the color of carpet in the foyer, about politicians, about the way we drive, about methods of discipline, about vaccines, about ways to tell people about Jesus, and about dozens of other things. We can sin in all of these areas, but to say that someone has another preference or another opinion does not mean that someone is sinning.

How do I think of you and speak to you, about matters of personal preference and personal opinion? I can have preferences and we can offer opinions, but I err when I value those preferences and opinions so much that I think anyone who disagrees with me is somehow sinning. Make sure the sin is sin.

Now a second idea: **MAKE SURE YOUR LOVE IS LOVE.** Let's go back to that phrase about covering over a multitude of sins. Peter also uses it. He writes, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." Even if we are not sure about this idea of "covering over," we do know what we are doing when we are "covering over." We are loving. We only follow James' call here, when our words pass the "test" of love.

This "bringing back" and "turning sinners" must be in the context of a relationship. We don't have the right to steamroll each other. We must know each other well to love each other well as we speak and act against wandering. This is why I have encouraged you to develop the kind of relationships that will nurture this sort of love. Maybe you should be in a Bible Study or a Life Group. Maybe you should form a small group of people who ask each other real questions and expect real answers. Maybe you would do best by doing this with just one person. The form is not important. This is important: that we are developing a church culture where these kinds of relationships are growing, so that we can speak the truth to each other in love. Remember: this is a gift. It is a gift of love.

So how do I make sure my love is love? Let's say I am the corrector. You are wandering, and I need to say or do something. Here are some good questions for me to ask myself.

1. *Have I prayed about this?* I am tempted to quickly confront you. But unless it is a great emergency, I ought to wait. Maybe I should think and pray about you and your situation. What would be good to say? How can I speak in a way that I can be heard? What would be good timing? What spirit would help you to hear me?

2. *Have I searched my life?* In Matthew 7, Jesus offers famous words about taking the log out of your own eye. The idea is that before I say something to you about your life, I should consider my life, especially in the area where you may be wandering.

For example, let's say I believe I must say something about how I observe you treating your spouse. A first step for me would be to say, "How do I treat my spouse? How do I fail in this? Do I do what I see in you? How do I need to admit my sin and turn from it?" Jesus wants us to speak to each other about our "logs"

- about our sins. But he humbles our spirits by calling us to first search our lives.

3. *Am I doing this for your good?* I might just want to prove a point. I might just want to feel good about myself. I might just want to get back at you for the way you have treated me. Those are all terrible reasons for following James' words here. If I love you, I want good for you. I want you to live a righteous life, and even be saved from eternal death. That is why I speak.

4. *Can I receive what I give?* In other words, what if someone would come to me, and say to me what I am about to say to you? How would I react? If these words are not appropriate for you to give to me, then why are they appropriate for me to give to you? Even as I offer correction, I must have a heart that is willing to receive correction.

We don't like this. But God wants this. So let's do this, but let's make sure the sin is sin, and make sure your love is love.

With this, we end our journey through James. I want to finish with some words from a great church leader of the 19th century - Charles Hodge. He taught at Princeton Seminary, but he came after two godly men who helped start the seminary: Archibald Alexander and Samuel Miller. As Hodge recalled the lives of these men, he said, "Most men have reason to rejoice that their bosoms are opaque, but these holy men, as it always seemed to me, might let the sun shine through them."

When something is opaque, you cannot see through it. You might see the outside, but not the inside. We like this. We live in this world, letting people see what we want them to see. In the church, we let people see that we seem to be holy. We like to be opaque.

But if we are living a real life of real faith, the sun can shine right through us. Our words are not just words. Real faith produces a real life. Before God and people we can say, "Look. See. Shine the light right through me. I am not faking. Jesus is real. My faith in him is real. My life for him is real. Yes, I fail, but I know he forgives my sins and fills me with his Spirit, so that I can truly live for him."

Can you say that today? Maybe you are a young person who has been brought to church for years. Maybe you are an older person who has seemed religious for years. Maybe you are at the peak of life, and you want people to believe you are a Christian.

Is it real? If I could shine a light into your heart, what would I see? As I shine the light on your life, what do I see? But forget about me. What does God see in your heart and life? Is it all just a show, or would a light shined into your heart reveal a real faith in Jesus, expressed in a real life for Jesus?

If James were with us today, I believe he would say, "You can hide from people, but not from God. If God has shown you Jesus, show Jesus in the way you live. Let that light shine into you, so that light may shine from you." For his glory. For your good. Really.