

Wanderers Need Rescuers



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James 5:19-20

There are some moments in parenting that absolutely terrify you. For me, it happened a couple years ago. We got invited to do a beach retreat. Somebody called and asked if I could come and bring my family to Panama City Beach for a week to be a camp pastor. I was like, "Did you say Panama City Beach? YES! I don't need details. I am there!" So we took our family to the beach and got a vacation out of it while I preached every night to their students. We had this awesome beach location. There were all these kids and camps there and we let our kids run and play with everybody. It was great!

About mid-week, we decided to go to 30A and visit a touristy beach. We get there and start to get everything set up and the first thing I noticed was that there were beach chairs and umbrellas everywhere. As Dad, I had to get a beach chair and umbrella for my family so I go to the guy who has the beach chairs and umbrellas. One thing you need to know about me that drives my wife crazy is that I love talking to strangers on vacation. It is like my favorite thing to do! I will talk to anybody about anything. I just love talking to strangers on vacation. So I get to the guy I am supposed to get a beach chair and umbrella and he is a cool dude. His name is Mike

and we start talking. He tells me he is an ex-pilot in the Air Force, now he is involved in a church and is a deacon. They just had a hurricane that went through and they are rebuilding their church. I just think to myself that Mike is awesome! By now, fifteen minutes have gone by and Katie is giving me that look like...*I still have my towel. We are still not set up. Chair? Umbrella? That would be nice!* Now, the kids have just gone crazy. My three boys have boogie boards so they run off and go play. Mike and I are in the middle of this great conversation when Crider comes back, Finn comes back, but no Garnett (G was about five years old then). I say, "Umm, Crider, where is G?" Crider says, "I don't know. Finn was watching him." I say, "Hey, Finn, where is G?" Finn says, "I don't know. Crider was watching him." So I tell my new friend Mike that I have to pause this conversation and go look for my lost kid...and by the way, "can you help?" So I am looking, Mike is looking, and then I have this moment of panic because I look out at the ocean for the first time...in Panama the waves usually are not too big, but they were white-capping on this day and the flags were up warning everyone to not go out into the water. I am thinking...*Uh-oh. I didn't tell my five year old to stay out of the ocean...and he has a boogie board!* I look everywhere for G, but there are chairs and umbrellas as far as I can see so I cannot see down the beach, I cannot even see ten feet in front of me. I am starting to panic a little bit so I start doing that fast walk you do when you start to get worried but you don't want to show that you are worried. I start asking the people around me, "Hey, have you seen a little boy? I am missing my little boy!" I am yelling out "G...G...G!" My voice gets louder and louder, and my walk gets faster and faster. By now, I am in a heavy jog and a heavy yell. People are starting to ask me if everything is ok...*DOES IT LOOK LIKE EVERYTHING IS OK? NO! I HAVE LOST MY LITTLE BOY! HAVE YOU SEEN HIM?* I am just panicked! This went on for what felt like an hour, but it was really only about twenty-five seconds to be realistic, but it felt like forever. All of a sudden, that pit of your stomach feeling came...*I know where he is...He is at the bottom of the ocean because I did not warn him! He went on his boogie board. His brothers did not watch out for him, he wandered away, and now he is gone! He is gone forever!* I begin running the beach, looking straight ahead, looking out towards the ocean, yelling with everything I

have. People start getting up from their chairs and running too, so I now have a crowd of people following me and yelling out "G!" when they don't even know who G is, trying to help me find him. Then all of a sudden, about fifty feet in front of me I see this little boy wearing board shorts, no shirt, and a boogie board. He is face down and crying, sobbing! This little boy hears..."G!" from his dad. He looks up and there is a HUGE smile of relief that overcomes him. He takes off running, I take off running, we hug in the middle, I am crying, he is crying, and everyone around us starts clapping. It is one of those moments of thinking the worst was going to happen, but the best thing happened.

There was my little G. He did not run away from Mom and Dad. What happened was he wandered. He wandered after the waves. He wandered after the beach ball. He wandered after the other kids playing. As he wandered farther and farther away, all of a sudden, he looked up and realized he was lost and he didn't know how to get back. In that moment of being lost and in that moment of understanding that he had no way home, what G did not realize was that there was a rescuer on the move. His dad was rescuing. His dad was running. The truth is every wanderer needs a rescuer. We are going to see in our Scripture as we close out James, that James is going to talk to us as a church and he is going to tell us that there are people who are going to wander from the faith. As people wander from the faith, what do they need? They need a rescuer. They need you and me to rescue them and bring them back.

Scripture

"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."

As we read this text, it is really easy to see what James was trying to show. Some people are going to wander away and what they need is a rescuer to come and rescue them. See, there are two different people in

this text: a wanderer and a rescuer. What caught me off guard when I first read this was I realized James was not writing this to the wanderer, which I would have assumed that was who he was writing to. The audience is really the rescuer. He is trying to tell Christians/believers that it is a good thing to go and rescue someone who is wandering away from the faith. Now, the question has to be why would you have to tell somebody that it is a good thing to rescue somebody?

We were eating breakfast at Hih-Burger yesterday morning and we ran into an old neighbor of ours. She was a girl who would hang out with our kids. She was a little older, but she would come and jump on the trampoline with them so we became friends with her and her mom. We had not seen her in years. Katie said, "Hey! That is [so-and-so] she was our neighbor." Immediately we connected and said hi. We got to talking and she is telling us about her life. Within a few sentences she says, "I am a firefighter now. I work for Calloway County Fire and Rescue." It was like she wanted to tell us that. She wanted to tell us that because she wanted us to know that she was doing good. Immediately we knew that was a good thing. It is a good thing to rescue people from fires. Firefighters are heroes. Can we all agree with that?

But, you know, when it comes to spiritual rescuers we are not always seen as heroes and it doesn't always feel good to be a spiritual rescuer. When you are trying to rescue somebody from sin, when you are trying to pull them out of their sin, what you are saying is...*I know that thing makes you happy. You love it. I know you think this is the best for your life, but I am telling you it is not. I am trying to show you that you are wrong and what you need is Christ.* Even though James is going to say that to rescue someone is a good thing to do, it doesn't feel like a good thing in the moment of rescuing. It kind of feels like we are ruining the party. It kind of feels like we are a killjoy. It is like we are a person who has a friend that is on a diet but the friend is about to eat a cupcake. We are like...*umm... don't eat that cupcake. You are on a diet.* Well, you are doing a good thing for your friend, but it doesn't feel like it. You are trying to look out for their

overall health. That is what it feels like often times when you are trying to rescue someone from sin.

We have this belief in our culture that the highest value is happiness. We hear it in movies and read it in books all the time. We will hear things like, "At the end of the day, I just want you to be happy." "Don't you want me to be happy?" "My happiness is the most important." When you go to rescue someone who is wandering away, at the moment you are not making them happy, you are pulling them from the thing that makes them happy because you know it is only temporary happiness. What they need is Jesus who will make them forever happy. So, in the moment, it doesn't feel good. That is why James has to write and say let the rescuer know they are doing something good. They are rescuing someone from death and covering a multitude of sin. Why does he have to tell us this is good? Because it doesn't feel good. Have you ever tried to go after a friend who is wandering in sin? Did it feel good having that first conversation? Was that phone call really happy or was it awkward? It is hard. It is awkward. We don't want to do it, but James is saying it is a good thing because what you are doing is bringing somebody back. You are saving someone's soul.

We are going to talk about what, exactly, that means in just a moment. But the first question I have is what gives you the right to tell someone else that they are living wrong and they need to repent? What gives you the right to do that? Who are you? Judge not lest you be judged. Who are you to tell me that I am doing something wrong? Well, the answer is you are family. That's what gives you the right. Notice what the text says in verse 19, "My *brothers*, if anyone among *you* wanders from the truth..." He is writing to us as brothers and sisters. So who is he talking about? Who is wandering? It is family members. Just for a moment, look around this room. Look at each other and all the faces. This is who he is talking about — these people right here who gather with you for worship, come to small group, go to Sunday school, and who you are in discipleship with. It is the family who are wandering away. So how do you have the right to correct them? Because you are a brother or a sister. Because you are a part of the family. The family gives us the obligation and right to call other people out

because this is a family thing, and we have all agreed we are in the family of God. This is about the Kingdom of God so we have the right and the obligation to point out and push people towards the Lord, Jesus Christ. We have the right and obligation to go after a wanderer because they are a brother or a sister.

Really, when somebody wanders from the truth, there are two possibilities about their identity. Either they are a saint and they are acting in sin, or they are a sinner who once acted like a saint. Wandering and then calling them back will often reveal if they are truly a saint and truly redeemed, or if they just looked like and smelled like a saint for a little bit and now they are living out who they really are, a sinner, not someone who is in fellowship with Christ, not in the body of Christ. 1 John chapter 2, verse 19, says this (he is talking about people who are leaving the family), "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us." So some people are going away. They are leaving and wandering from the truth and he says they are not coming back, which shows what? It shows they were of us but they really were not of us because they went out and did not come back. That means they look like us, felt like us, and sang like us, but really, they were not because their sin showed they loved sin more than Jesus.

Again, James is talking to two people. He is talking to the wanderer and the rescuer. What does he say about the wanderer? Notice this...if anyone does what? Wanders from the truth. Now, think about that word, "wander." I thought when I first read that, it was a really scary word — wander from the truth. It doesn't say they bolted from the truth, they rejected the truth, or they denied the truth, no, they wandered from the truth. See, to me that word is more subtle. It is slow. It is an easy progression. It is one step after another. It is something that is not identifiable until all of a sudden you find yourself in a wrong place. See, G did not run away from mom and dad; he just wandered after the waves and the beach balls, and then all of a sudden, he woke up in a place where he was not supposed to be. Often, as believers, we can wander away from

the truth, not purposefully, not meaning to, but if we don't watch our steps and we don't have people who are watching over us we can end up in a place where we never would have imagined we could be. Very few affairs start in a hotel room; they start on a text message. They start on a conversation at work. They start on instant messenger. They start on a little flirt. They start with a long friendship that really should not be that intimate but then it leads to that affair. It is wandering away from the truth. Few people went to bed loving Jesus, and then woke up the next morning and just decided to not love Jesus and love sin. Very few people wake up and say I am done with Christianity. But do you know what a lot of people do? They wake up and stop reading their Bibles. They wake up and stop praying. They wake up and stop gathering. They wake up and stop hanging out with gospel friends and gospel communities. They wake up and stop repenting of sin. It's over time, and one day they wake up and realize they don't know if they even believe in Jesus anymore. That was not a sudden thing; that was a subtle thing. That was an inch-by-inch wandering, and then you finally wander to a place that you could never have imagined that you would get to.

Notice what we wander from — we wander from the truth. Now, what is the truth? James has identified that the truth is the gospel, so they are wandering from the gospel. In Galatians 1:6, Paul would say, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." Paul is astonished...*I cannot believe you would turn from faith alone and Christ alone!* They are turning to faith plus works. That was the whole story of Galatia. They were turning to having Jesus but also needing goodness, works, circumcision, and all of these other things. Paul says you are deserting the truth of the gospel. See, we can wander from the truth, but what you need to know is underneath every sin is a lie. Every sin starts with a lie. You believe something that is not true so you begin to wander from the truth. You begin to believe lies like, 'I deserve this, even though Scripture would say God forbids this, I deserve this because my situation is unique. Me and God have this worked out. I know for most people this would be wrong, but for me it is right because of all of the circumstances. I prayed about it and God

told me it was ok. I know Scripture says I am not supposed to, but I prayed so my prayers and Jesus actually trump God's Word and it is ok in this circumstance. I am special. I am unique.' All of these little lies lead us to wander from the truth, the truth of the gospel that you are a follower of Christ and you submit to Him as Lord and Savior. Instead, we wander from the truth.

There is a guy in Scripture named Demas and I don't know anyone who has been named after him. If your name is Demas, I am sorry. Bad illustration, but probably, no one is named Demas, and there is probably a reason why. Look with me in Philemon chapter 1. We are going to learn just a little bit about Demas. We don't know much about his life, but Paul references him in Scripture. Notice what Paul says in verses 23–24, "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers." So Paul name dropped Demas as a fellow worker...*Hey, you know, Demas. He is my boy. He is my fellow worker. We are in this together. He is pursuing the gospel and loving the gospel. He is one of my guys! So, if you see Demas encourage him and pat him on the back, as he is a fellow worker.* That was early in Paul's ministry. But then, at the end of Paul's ministry, in 2 Timothy 4:10, Paul says this, "For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." So now, he is name dropping Demas again, but now Demas is a deserter. He is not a worker; he is a deserter. He has deserted Paul, why? Because he fell in love with the present world. He has gone away. I don't know the story or the circumstance, but I am guessing that Demas did not go to bed one night as a fellow worker and laborer in the gospel and then woke up the next morning and said...*You know what, I am out. I am deserting Paul. I am deserting the gospel.* No, what happened is this slow fade, this wandering from love of Jesus to love with the present world. Just like G chasing a shiny beach ball, Demas is chasing all of the little shiny things of the world and eventually they get his affections where he loves the present world more than he loves Christ. Paul would say he has gone away. He has deserted. He has wandered from the truth.

We know that the reality is we are capable of wandering. We have seen people wander. So what do we do when people wander away? We go to rescue. We move to rescue. Notice what the Scripture says, "...if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back..." There is that beautiful line that someone is bringing him back. Notice it says "someone." It doesn't say the pastor goes and brings him back. I think a pastor can bring a sinner back and can bring a wanderer back, but this doesn't say the pastor, it says someone, which means ANYONE. What is he trying to say? This is a family activity. This is something that we all do as brothers and sisters to those who wander. Someone needs to go on rescue. It doesn't have to be an official leader; it can be anyone. The brothers and sisters need to protect each other from wandering.

Over Christmas, we went to Gatlinburg and we got to do some hiking. One of the coolest hikes we did was on Mount LeConte. We only made it to Alum Cave because there was a lot of snow and ice everywhere. We were walking down this trail with ice and snow and I am telling my boys, "You need to watch out for Evie." Evie is five and she is a trooper, but she also, well... wanders. She is a wanderer. There was a good little path we could all follow, but Evie did not really like that path; she liked the ice and the snow. I would continually tell Finley, "Finley, grab her hand! Don't let her wander off because if she wandered off it would be a long way down and it would not be good." I had to tell my boys to watch out for their sister because she was going to wander, "Grab her hand. She is going to wander. There is a path she needs to stay on because this path is good; that cliff is bad." It is as if James is telling us...*Hey brothers and sisters, you have brothers and sisters that are wandering off of the path, and the cliff is steep. What we need to do is grab their hands and pull them back. We go after them.* This is the importance of being connected in this body.

At HBC, we say a lot, "Find your people." What does that mean? It means to get in actual gospel communities with people in this congregation, whether that is a small group, Sunday school, discipleship, or friends outside of church to serve with. Have some people that know you and that you know because when they go wandering you can go after them, and

when you go wandering, they can go after you. You want to be known and to know, so that you can hold hands and pull back or be pulled back.

See, there are rescuers. There is someone who is bringing the wanderer back and we see in verse 20 that we need to let the person who is rescuing know something. They need to know they did something good, because it doesn't feel good. It says this, "...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." Again, let him know that one he rescues — let Finley know he is doing something good...*Hey, your sister is not falling off a cliff- that is a good thing!* That is obvious, but we need to be reminded that we are doing a good thing when we go after someone in their sin because it doesn't feel good. It feels mean. It feels like judging...*Just leave them alone. They are happy. I don't want to mess with that, just let them be. Let them fall off the cliff and die...*that is what we are saying when we don't go after, we don't pursue, and we don't try to have that conversation. Let's be honest, often when we go after it doesn't end up good because the person doesn't want to come back. They are happier in their sin. That is on them. That is between them and the Lord. What we do is go after. We go and tell them the news that they can repent. So there is this action. What is the good action? If you are a rescuer, you are bringing someone back. You are bringing someone back from death and you are covering their sins. We are rescuing, but there is a result to it. Their soul is being rescued from death and their sins are being covered.

Now, when it says that what we do is actually save them from death and we cover their sins, I think anybody hearing James's letter or reading it knows James is not saying that we, as the rescuer, save them or that we, as the rescuer, cover their sin because we know from Scripture that we cannot save anybody or cover anyone's sin. That has been clearly proclaimed in Scripture. What he is saying is we participate in Jesus's rescue of them when we go after them, because what are we calling them back to? We are not calling them back to good works. We are calling them back to a person, and the person is Jesus Christ. That is who you are

calling them back to because Jesus is the one who saves. Jesus is the one who covers a multitude of sins.

I love how James puts it. He says what we do is save the sinner from his wandering and we will save his soul from death. I love that word, "soul," that James puts in there. It is like he is reminding us that we are not just bodied creatures. We are not just bodies; we are bodies with souls. God made us both, and both are important. What you do in your body matters, but your soul matters also. One day, in the resurrection, you are going to live soul and body forever somewhere. That soul is a reminder that this life is not all there is. There is another life coming, another forever coming, and you are either going to spend eternity with Jesus, or apart from Jesus — and that is called second death, eternal death. What he is saying is the rescue mission of the church is saving people from that second death. How is that? By calling people to repent, and those who are true believers will repent and will come back home. Those who are not true believers will continue in their sin and will continue to love something more than Christ.

What is our obligation? Our obligation is to go on rescue. We cannot control their response. We cannot control what they do. Our obligation is to go and to tell them to come back home. If the wanderer will turn and come back, this turning will cover a multitude of sins. He could have just said their sins were forgiven or whatever they did will be forgiven, but he says a multitude of sins. I love that he says a multitude of sins because we can all imagine somebody who has went too far and we could think they are too far gone so I'm not even going to go after them. Do you remember that prodigal son? Do you remember how far he went? When he came back what happened? The father did not judge him. The father did not throw him out. The father did not condemn. The father did not guilt trip him. No, the father hugged him, kissed him, killed the fatten calf, and threw a party because that is what grace is like, grace that is greater than all of our sin, ALL of it, the multitude of it! You could fill the universe with it, and guess what? The cross of Christ atones for ALL of your sin when you come to faith in Christ, the multitude of it. You cannot outrun the grace of God no matter how great your sin is because His grace is greater.

So, if you are wandering away from the truth and you think you have gone a little too far, James says a *multitude* of sin, not just a little, not just a lot, a multitude. In other words, a whole, whole, whole, lot because there is a whole, whole, whole lot of grace that is offered to you when you come back home.

So what is James trying to tell us? He is trying to say, yes, people will wander from the truth. You might wander from the truth. And what do wanderers need? They need rescuers. They need people who will go and rescue, will go and call them back. So, I want to close with a word to rescuers and a word to wanderers. Here is a word to rescuers. If you are going to try and rescue somebody, here is what the Word of God says in Ephesians chapter 4, verse 15, "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ." So we are supposed to speak in what? Truth and love. Both of those have to be together if you are going to rescue someone. See, if you go and rescue someone and it is only love, then you are just going to tell them that whatever you want to do just go for it. If you are happy then we are happy and God is happy. We are all just happy and it is all good. No, that is just love that is going to condemn them, and you are not telling them the truth. So love only, never gets to the truth and never calls them to repent. But truth only, comes with only Bible verses and condemnation. It only pushes people away if it is truth with no love. You are going to lead them farther in their wandering. They might actually start running. What you need is truth and love. You tell them the truth, you give them the warning from Scripture, and you tell them they need to repent, but it is met with full steam love. Love that goes after them, weeps with them, and mourns with them. It is love that is showing that you have their best interest at heart. So to rescue it has to be done in truth and love.

I also want to give a word to the wanderers, and I want to be honest, this could be you right now and you don't even know it. That is the thing about wandering. See, G didn't know he was running away from mom and dad. He did not have a diabolical plan to run away from home. No, he was chasing a beach ball. He was wandering and then he got to a place where

he couldn't find home. When you are wandering, you don't even know it. That is what is so scary about wandering away from the truth. So the first word to the wanderers — are you following Jesus? I want you to answer that question in your brain and in your heart. Am I actually, with my feet, my hands, and my heart, am I following and pursuing after Jesus? Here is the truth, if you are not following Jesus, if you are not walking with Jesus, you are not standing still; you are actually going backwards. The Christian life is like being in a river and swimming against the current. The moment we stop swimming, we don't stay put, we go in the opposite direction. That is why Demas became a worker then all of a sudden became someone who was deserting because he loved the world more than he loved Jesus. That doesn't happen overnight. It happens when you stop swimming and when you stop following. Then, all of a sudden, you get to a place where you are downriver and you don't even know where Jesus is. It is a slow fade. So, the question is, are you following? Can you really say in your own heart and in your life that you are following Jesus? Are you are looking at what He is telling you to do and following after Jesus? Because if you are not following, you are not standing still, you are going backwards. You are wandering. See, if someone had said to G, "Hey, little boy, where is your dad?" G could have looked up and said, "Oh, there he is! Let me go back there!" There was a moment where if he had just turned around he would have been right there, but instead he continued.

The second question I want you to ask yourself is — are you cultivating spiritual habits? Right now in your life, are you cultivating spiritual habits? The two most important spiritual habits on a daily basis are Bible reading and prayer. Are you reading your Bible? If you are not reading your Bible and engaging your Bible, you are wandering away. It is that serious. God has given you His words to connect to Him and follow Him. We need to be people who are reading God's Word. Have it open on your nightstand, read it at bedtime, read it in the morning. Read it! Pursue Jesus through His Word because if we are not reading the Word then we are wandering towards the world. It is going to happen. And then, cultivate the spiritual discipline of prayer. Are you praying to the Lord, fellowshiping with Him, communicating with Him? As soon as G stopped talking to mom and dad

then he was gone! If he had just kept talking, we would have known where he was. If he had just talked to his brothers, he would have known where he was, but instead he just wandered away. Are you cultivating spiritual disciplines?

Lastly, are you listening to those who love you most? When you wander away, the people who love you will start saying things to you. They will start calling you back. In that moment, you have a decision...do I listen to the people who love me, or do I listen to the people who like me right now? Because people who like you right now, when you are going after sin, they are going to like you in that moment but they could care less about you after it, so you start listening to people who like you, but you don't listen to people who love you, care for you, and have your best interest at heart. I just want to ask, are you listening to the people who love you the most? Because when they speak a word to you that hurts, that doesn't sound good, you better listen and take it to heart because you might be wandering away into danger. You might be wandering away from the Lord and they are calling you back. They are coming after you in rescue.

So, the two questions I want us to think about as we leave are the following:

1. Who do I know who might be wandering away? How can I go and rescue them?
2. Could it be me? Am I wandering away? If so, what I need to do is turn, turn back to the Lord. I need to start pursuing the Lord. I need to repent because in repentance and turning to Jesus, guess what? My soul is secure! My sins are forgiven! I am at a good place when I am with Christ.

On that beach, there was a little boy who was crying his eyes out in the middle of the beach because he did not mean to get away from us, but he did. He did not run from us. Instead, he wandered. He wandered to a place

where he woke up and realized he was lost. What that little boy didn't know was, in the midst of his tears, there was a rescuer on the way. The rescuer was his dad. Somebody was coming after him! You have friends and loved ones who are wandering away and they are getting to a spot where they might feel lost and they might feel scared. They might not know how to come back. What they need is a rescuer who cares enough to go after them, to speak that word to them, and to call them back. If you are going to be that rescuer, it might not end well. That person might say, "You know, I want my sin more than Christ" and there is a departure, but we are called to rescue. We are called to go. We are called to tell. We are called to call them back because there are other times when in that moment, we meet a person who knows they are lost and now they know the way home because you have told it to them. What is the way home? It is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the way home! The gospel is the way home — His death, burial, and resurrection — either for a first-time relationship or a renewed relationship. How do you get it? It is through repentance and faith that Christ covers my sin and Christ conquers my death. I will hold to Christ and when I come back, I am met with love. That is what the gospel is. It is a gospel that covers a multitude of sins. Yes, there are people who are going to wander; you might wander away. What those people need is a rescuer. And what James is trying to say is if you go on rescue, you are doing something that is good.