

Marks of a Faith That Works

A Faith that Works... ***Restores the Sinner*** James 5:19-20

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, 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. James 5:19-20 NASB

As humans, we have three basic needs that we share in common: to be loved, to be led and to be linked.

We all need to be *loved*. We crave for affirmation and acceptance by others.

We all need to be *led*. We long for authority figures to guide and direct us through the sometimes tragic twists and turns of life. Even when a child is in rebellion, it is often a cry for someone to take leadership in his or her life.

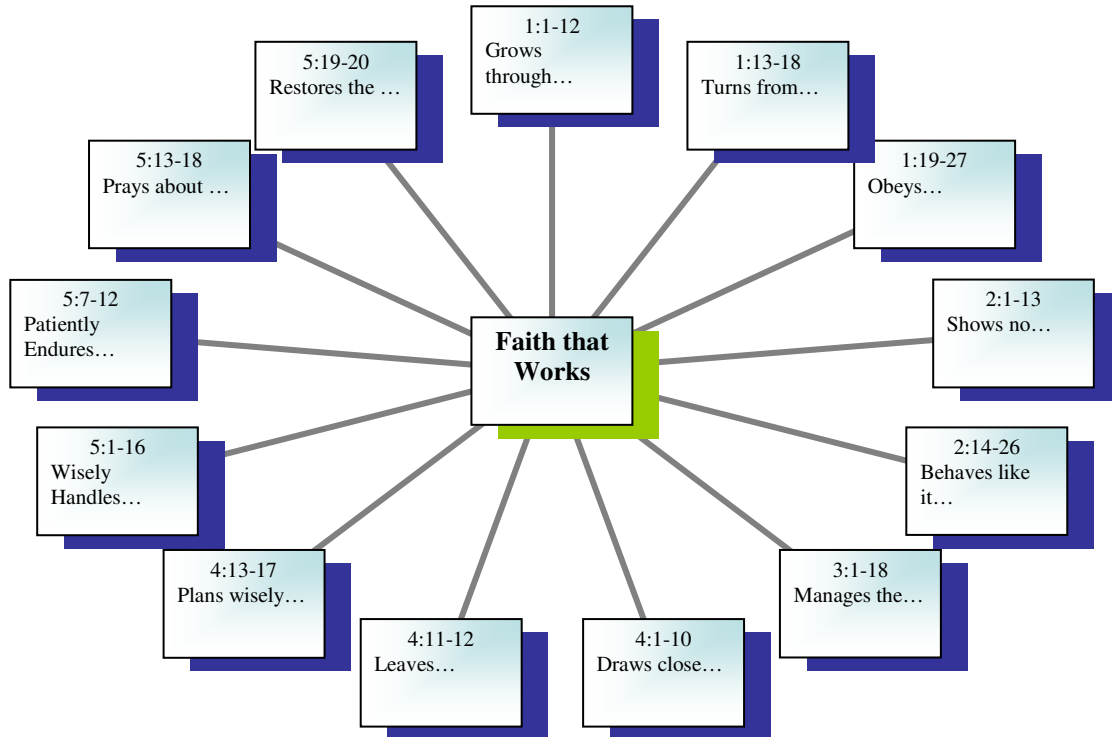
And we all need to be *linked* to others. We long to *belong*. No wonder that God placed us in families. No wonder that God has placed his children in the family of God called the church.

The two short verses that we are looking at today have a lot to say about these three basic needs. For the Christ follower, it is in the church, and especially in the local expression of the church that each of these needs is to be met...the need to be loved, led and linked.

You see, James says here so much more than simply how to turn a sinner from the error of his way. James is talking about *authentic community*. James is talking about the crying need for accountability in the life of the believer and in the life of the believing community. Keeping with the theme of his letter, James is saying that a faith that works *lives in authentic community with other believers*. And one way we do this is by restoring those who stray from the truth.

However, before we look at these two short verses, let's step back and get an overview of what we have seen in this letter over the past nearly four months.

James is throughout this letter talking about a *faith that works*. Just what does that kind of faith look like? James gives you and me the answer to that question in no uncertain terms. In five chapters he lays out twelve characteristics of genuine faith. And as we evaluate our own faith in light of these twelve characteristics, we can gauge to what degree our own faith is genuine. Just what are these twelve characteristics?



As you can see, much of what James says touches upon our life in community one with another. And that makes sense. Our faith shows its true colors in the way we relate to one another in the family of God. And the way we relate to one another is determined by whether or not we see ourselves as *responsible* for one another.

Let me read to you one more time what James says in these two concluding verses:

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, 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. James 5:19-20 NASB

James is talking about what I am calling *authentic community*. And here James defines authentic community as *mutual accountability*. When a brother or sister strays from the truth, we have the responsibility of turning him or her back.

I. The Possibility of Falling

What James has to say can be viewed under two headings. First, he talks about the *possibility of falling*. Then he talks about the *responsibility of restoring*.

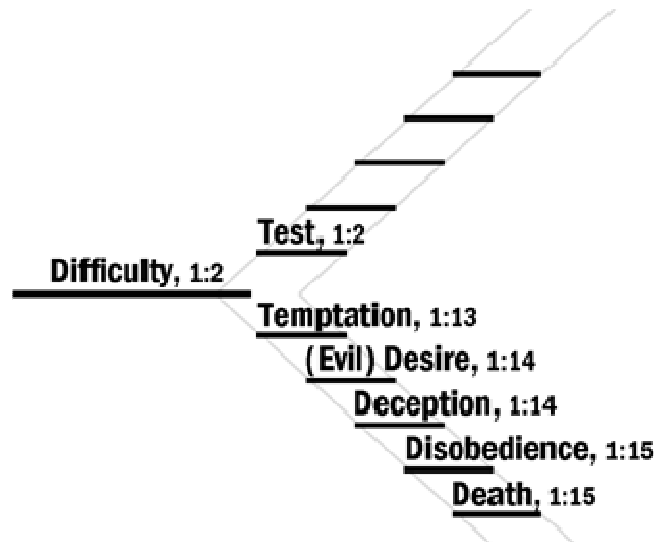
James' words remind us that discipline is a *family* issue. James is very specific: "...if any among you strays ...". James is talking about a believer *falling* into sin, not about an unbeliever *living* in sin. While there is a time and place for the church to be the moral conscious of society, our primary concern should be with the believing brother or sister who is straying. I don't discipline the kids of the family next door. And God doesn't spank the devil's children. But he does

discipline his own children, and he most often uses other family members in the process. Discipline is a family affair.

Secondly, notice that James says, “*If* any among you strays...” In using a conditional statement James is talking about a situation that is quite probable. James words are like a blinking yellow light at an intersection. In the Body of Christ, our lives intersect one another. And as they do, James is saying, “Look ahead! Look to the left! Look to the right! And look behind! Someone – a brother, a sister in Christ – may be wandering from the truth!”

James gives you and me here a dose of realism. We *are* susceptible. We *are* vulnerable. Not one of us is exempt. Paul shares the same opinion. “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man” 1 Corinthians 10:12-13 NIV.

What does it mean to *stray* from the truth? The word itself means “to wander.” The word in James’ language sounds like our word “planet.” Planets are sometimes called wandering stars because they are constantly shifting position in the heavens. James has already used this word in verse 16 of chapter one where it is translated “deceived.” There he warns you and me to *not* be deceived by sin which will only lead to death. Remember the perilous, downward steps: desire → deception → disobedience → death?



None of us *plunges* into sin; we *wander* into sin.ⁱ That is what James is talking about when he speaks of “wandering from the truth.”

James isn’t talking here about preferences. He’s not talking about areas of Christian freedom. He’s not talking about a brother doing something that is fully within the parameters of Christian liberty. No, he’s talking about a spiritual sibling – your brother or sister in Christ – who is headed down that disastrous, deceptive pathway of sin. And his emphasis is not so much on doctrinal sin (though that would certainly be included) as on behavioral sin. He’s not only talking about erring in what you believe, but erring in how you behave.

II. The Responsibility of Restoring

That's the possibility of falling, of wandering. What is our responsibility of restoring?

James lays responsibility for the erring believer squarely at the feet of the believing community. "*My brethren, if any among you* strays from the truth..." (19a). It is a believer who strays and it is believers who must restore.

Right off the bat, James begins with a familiar expression that he has already used twenty-one times in this letter: *brothers* or as the NLT puts it, "brothers and sisters."

This manner of addressing fellow members of the community in Christ is no cliché or overused stereotype void of meaning. It is rather a term filled with compassion, intimacy and a profound sense of mutual accountability and responsibility.

Already in the Gospels Jesus sets the stage for this perspective during one of his preaching tours in Galilee. Jesus' reply to the one who informs him of his family's request to speak with him profoundly challenges our human paradigm of relational priorities:

He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Matthew 12:48-50 NIV

The most natural response to the question is that those with whom Jesus had a blood tie – these are his true family members. But instead – and with insightful but unfamiliar words that signify the beginning of a new era in God's economy – Jesus highlights a new perspective on family relationships.

"Who are my brothers?" Jesus asks. The word itself is formed of two parts that when put together signifies, "from the same womb." As believers, we *are* blood brothers and sisters, purchased by the very blood of our Elder Brother, Christ himself (Hebrews 2:11). It is no wonder, then, that the New Testament frequently describes our new family identity as a brotherhood (1 Peter 2:17). In fact, *this identity as brothers and sisters in Christ must take precedence even over our biological family.*ⁱⁱ Though our biological, earthly family may fall apart through divorce, death or difficult circumstance, our status in God's eternal family will never change.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sin is not just an individual problem; it is a corporate problem. The believer who strays needs to recognize that he is accountable. And the community that surrounds needs to recognize that they are responsible. Accountability and responsibility – together they are like two wings that can help the church fly towards godliness.

James says. He doesn't say, "You who are the pastors of the church." He doesn't even say, "You who are the elders of the church." This responsibility of restoring straying brothers and sisters is not limited to the "paid staff." Unfortunately, we continue to have this idea of the pastoral staff as our "paid help." It is the paid pastors, in the minds of some, who are to do the work of ministry. But we have it all wrong. The pastors are simply "enablers," the members are the true

ministers. And as ministers, we *each* are to be in accountability to others. And we *each* are to be responsible for one another.^{iv}

When was the last time *you* cared enough to speak into the life of a brother or sister who was straying from the truth? When was the last time you *cared* enough to call someone you haven't seen here in the fellowship for some time, out of concern that they were removing themselves from the caring community of faith?

It's interesting that Jesus uses this same word "gone astray" in the parable of the ninety-nine plus one.

¹² "What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? ¹³ "If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. ¹⁴ "So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish. Matthew 18:12-14 NASB

In our desire to win the lost we can sometimes forget our responsibility to win back the saved. The church should be, as Larry Crabb describes it, the *safest place on earth*. It is safe, not only because of the grace and forgiveness that is found within its relational walls; but also because of the assurance that, when you stray, someone will care enough to speak into your life.

How do we do this? How do you look for the one that has wandered off? How do you, as James says, "Turn a sinner from the error of his way?"

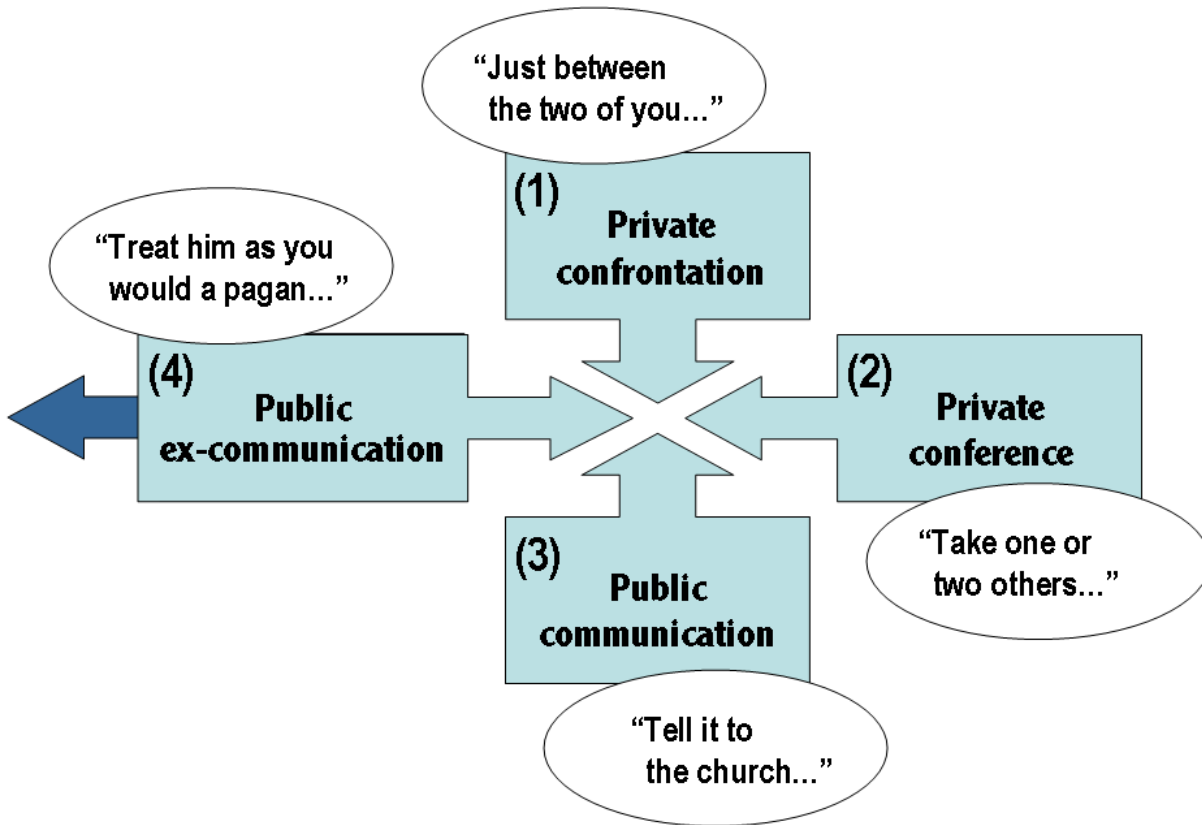
In Matthew chapter 18 Jesus lays out the specific steps for what James describes only in general terms.

¹⁵ If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶ "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that **BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED.** ¹⁷ "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Matthew 18:15-17 NASB

As my wife and I look back over the years of raising our own four children, we see so many areas where we fell short of the ideal. Often we just wanted an easy step-by-step process laid out for us to follow. Discipline is never easy and it can be quite messy at times.

Here in these verses Jesus leaves us with a clear process of discipline in the life of the church. It consists of four basic stages:

- (1) Private confrontation
- (2) Private conference
- (3) Public communication
- (4) Public ex-communication.^v



First, there is *private confrontation*. Jesus says in this passage: “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault, *just between the two of you*.”

Charles Finney once said, “If you see your neighbor sin, and you pass by and neglect to reprove him, it is just as cruel as if you should see his house on fire, and pass by and not warn him of it.”^{vi} Admittedly, our natural reaction is to avoid confrontation at all costs. It is far easier to ignore the sin or worse yet, to gossip about the sin. But this is not love, nor is it authentic community. Authentic community demands loving confrontation.^{vii}

But notice, such confrontation is first to be carried out *privately*: “just between the two of you.” That is, the one who sees or is aware of the sin, should go and point out the fault. But this is to be done privately and personally. Though not in this passage, we might also add that this is to be done *cautiously*: “or you also may be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).

Some years ago before coming to CB, I saw a colleague in ministry slip out of an adult book store. I was driving through town right at the time he exited the store. I’m sure that God had something to do with that. I immediately knew that I had a responsibility towards my brother. It wasn’t comfortable. I didn’t want to do it. I tried to come up with all kinds of arguments to avoid it. But I knew what love demanded. While at his house a day or two later, I asked my friend if we could talk a walk together. I said that I had something I would like to talk to him about. As we walked, I told him that I had seen him leave this adult book store. To give him the benefit of the

doubt, I asked him to verify my observation – was it indeed him or had I mistaken him for someone else. My friend immediately admitted his wrong, confessing his sin. We discussed the pull of temptation in this area of his life. We prayed together and covenanted to hold each other accountable for our personal purity. Since that time, my friend has gone on to accept much greater levels of responsibility and leadership in God’s work. I’ve asked myself, “What would have happened if God had not prompted me to speak into my brother’s life?”

I’ve also been on the receiving end. A few years ago, one of the previous members of our pastoral staff approached me during a communion service. We had all been invited to settle any differences we had with another member of the church before partaking of the bread and cup. As I was preparing my heart in a personal time of prayer, this brother laid his hand on my shoulders and indicated his need to talk. He proceeded to convey how I had just days before hurt him deeply by my words. He unburdened his heart, speaking the truth in love, and awaited my response. As I reflected on what he shared, I replied that I had been unaware of how painful my words had been. I immediately acknowledged my wrong and asked his forgiveness. With the wrong addressed and forgiveness extended, we were both able to then participate in the Lord’s supper in a meaningful, authentic way.

But what happens when the one confronted does *not* listen? At that point, we move to the next step which is *private conference*

Jesus says: “But if he will not listen, *take one or two others along*, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’“

The Old Testament frequently underscored the importance of two or more witnesses to ensure truthfulness and as a safeguard against prejudice (Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15). In this case, however, it does not seem that these additional witnesses have necessarily observed the sin in question, but are present in order to verify the interchange and especially to strengthen the reproof in the hope of restoration.^{viii}

This step essentially “puts the pressure on” and lends objectivity to the process. No one person, regardless of spiritual stature, can see all the facts. We each need the insight and accountability that other believers provide. And this applies not only to the one being confronted, but to the one confronting. These “one or two others” provide that much needed accountability and perspective.

But when there is no repentance at the second phase of confrontation, the words of verse 17 are applicable: “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.” This is the step of *public communication*.

We move here from the private sphere to the public sphere. It is ultimately the church, those who gather as believers in a specific locality, that serves as the final court of appeal in such situations. We are family members, and such issues involving a spiritual brother or sister need to be brought to the family.^{ix} In such a case, the leadership must always keep in mind the ultimate goal: repentance and restoration. The brothers and sisters must be encouraged to pray for the sinner and to collectively but humbly call the person to repentance. Public communication should lead to collective confrontation in which the members of the church family also warn and lovingly call the sinner to repentance.

Public communication of the sin leads to corporate confrontation of the sinner. But when there is no repentance, this ultimately leads to the step of *ex-communication from the church*. "...if he refused to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and as a tax-collector."

The word itself is derived from the Latin *ex* ("out") and *communicare* ("share, communicate"). So when one is "ex-communicated," they are placed out of the fellowship and no longer have a share in the life and communion of the church.

In Jesus' day, both Gentiles (indicated by the word "pagan") and tax collectors were considered outcasts of Jewish religious life. Separation from, not communication with, was the rule of thumb with regard to these folk. And this is what should take place with regard to believers who willfully pursue a sinful pattern in spite of the loving confrontation by other brothers and sisters in the church family.

Does such a step mean to shun or isolate the sinning believer? In following Jesus' model, we must continue to reach out to them in loving witness (Luke 15:1-2). But we are *not* to fellowship with them as members of the same family.

It's been said that the church is the only army that shoots its own fallen. Without a doubt, criticism and prideful judgment passed on fellow believers has given rise to such a perception. But the loving discipline that the church is called to exercise is a far cry from such tendencies. The discipline of a fellow brother or sister in the family of God is not intended to "shoot" a fallen saint, but rather to mend and heal.

The story is told of two friends, Jim and Philip, who grew up together through high school and college. After college they decided to join the marines. By a unique series of circumstances they were sent to Germany together where they fought side by side in one of history's ugliest wars.

One sweltering day during a fierce battle, amid heavy gunfire, bombing, and close-quarters combat, they were given the command to retreat. As the men were running back, Jim noticed that Phillip had not returned with the others. Panic gripped his heart. Jim knew if Phillip was not back in another minute or two, then he wouldn't make it.

Risking his own life, Jim went after Phillip. His heart pounding, he ran into the gunfire, calling out for his life-long friend. A short time later, his platoon saw him hobbling across the field carrying a limp body in his arms.

Jim's commanding officer upbraided him, shouting that it was a foolish waste of time and an outrageous risk. "Your friend is dead," he added, "and there was nothing you could do." "No sir, you're wrong," Jim replied. "I got there just in time. Before he died, his last words were 'I knew you would come.'"^x

To step into the life of a fellow believer who has strayed and who is wounded responds to the three deepest needs that we all share as humans: to be loved, to be led, and to be linked.

Notes

ⁱ The same idea seems to be communicated in Galatians 6:1 “Brothers, if someone is *caught* in a sin...” The NLT interprets this as “overcome by some sin.” Paul is probably here not talking about being caught red-handed *in* sin as much as being ensnared *by* sin.

ⁱⁱ This is not to say that Jesus or the authors of the New Testament disparage the biological family. Just the opposite is the case as can be seen in what Luther called the *Haustafeln* or “household rules” in the Epistles (Ephesians 5:21-6:9; Colossians 3:18-25). But what the New Testament authors do emphasize is the vital truth of our identity as a spiritual family which transcends all earthly and biological connections. The relational ties of our new spiritual family are as strong as the power of the cross.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is not surprising, then, that the designation “brothers” and in some cases “sisters” (Romans 16:1, 15; Philemon 2; James 2:15; 2 John 13) became the typical way of addressing fellow believers (Cf. Acts 2:37; 6:3; 9:30; Romans 1:13; 10:1; 16:7; 1 Corinthians 1:10; 6:8; 2 Corinthians 1:8; Galatians 1:11; Ephesians 6:10; Philippians 1:12; Colossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; etc.). Paul uses the expression 133 times.. In fact, every New Testament writer, with the exception of Jude, speaks of Christians as “brothers.” The designation expresses manward what “children of God” expresses Godward.

^{iv} We are all instructed to “carry one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2). We all have the responsibility of “encouraging one another” (1 Thess 5:11).

^v Though adapted, I am indebted to J. Carl Laney, “The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline” for this outline.

^{vi} Charles Finney, *Lectures to Professing Christians* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, Co. 1878), 61.

^{vii} “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted...” (Proverbs 27:5,6). In light of that, Jesus here calls us to “show him” his fault. The New Living Translation more appropriately renders it: “point out the fault.” This word, *elegxo*, is quite strong and literally means “bring to light, convict, convince, or expose” and is the same word used to describe the convicting work of the Holy Spirit in the world as described in John 16:8.

^{viii} See the excellent discussion in Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1982), 367.

^{ix} Some have understood Jesus’ words to mean “tell it to the elders” or “tell it to the pastor.” But Jesus’ instruction seems clear enough. The matter is to be conveyed to the *church*.

^x John C. Maxwell and Dan Reiland, *The Treasure of a Friend* (J. Countryman Books, 1999), pp. 27