

A few years ago, the pre-eminent Christian pollster George Barna discovered there is a 43% drop off in church engagement between the teen years and the young adult years, if not a drop off of faith itself. Today there are probably many more, since other polls reveal that some 30% of the American public are “nones,” that is, people who when polled about their religion, check “none.” Many of them are people who have wandered away from the truth they were taught as children. And they aren’t all young adults. Every Sunday untold numbers of middle aged and senior citizens sit at home all alone, estranged from the church of their youth because something happened to them in church once and they have never gone back.

But we don’t need statistics to tell us about those who have wandered from the truth. We know them personally. Many of them are our friends and neighbors, our uncles and nieces, our brothers and sisters, our children and our grandchildren. We’ve wept over them; we’ve talked to them; we’ve prayed for them; we’ve done everything we can think of to bring them back. Nothing has worked and we don’t know what to do. In many cases they have been gone so long and are so far away that it seems there is no hope for their return.

But wait! The very last words of the most practical letter in all the New Testament bring us a message from God about the wanderers and the “nones.” There is an encouraging promise and a solemn obligation in these words: *“My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.”* Did you hear that promise? No matter how far that loved one has wandered from the truth, no matter how filled with sin their life has been, any person can be saved from death and their sins will be covered in the sight of God.

There’s a solemn obligation in these words directed to every one of us: *“bring them back”* ... *“save them from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins.”* In many ways, that’s the aim of this entire epistle. James has been

writing to call the church back from the foolishness and error that does not live by God's word and will. He shares practical, hard-hitting teaching about this. James is not soft on sin, but nor is his purpose to moralize or condemn. **His final words tell us what he really wants. He wants to keep people from wandering away from the church.** As the letter comes to an end, he calls the church to join him in that mission, to take up where he left off, and to follow in his footsteps. *"Bring them back...turn people around from their wandering."*

James envisions a church that is very different from today's American church. In a society that values individual privacy, the church today is too often *a place of benign neglect*. We look the other way when people wander. We practice the now rejected policy of the US military, "Don't ask, don't tell." We're not talking about sexuality; we're talking about not intervening in the lives of anyone who wanders away. We don't want to meddle in other people's affairs. "If that's what they want to do, let them. It's not any of my business."

James says, to be honest, **"Yes, it is!"** Fellow church members are your brothers and sisters. James calls for a community that takes responsibility for wandering members and works together to reclaim them. Their blood family may not be able to reach them because of family dynamics. But you are God's new family, you are a blood-bought brother or sister of those who wander. It's up to you, their spiritual family. You can do what their natural families can't do.

**James offers three major characteristics of the early church in chapter five.** The early church was a *praying, singing, and healing* church. Justin Martyr was an early Christian apologist who wrote that countless demon-possessed people were healed by the Christians when all other exorcists had been helpless to cure them, and all their drugs had been to no avail. James insists that church leaders, then and now, tap into the power of God through *"prayer offered in faith."*

And as I've said, James is optimistic about the prospects of wanderers returning. He won't consider the possibility that they're too far gone to be saved. Remember this, he says, reminding his readers of something they already knew, of something so close to the heart of the Gospel that every

Christian knows it. We need to remember that anyone who repents and believes in Christ will be saved from eternal death and a multitude of sins are covered by the blood of Christ. James is calling *us* to be a church that *believes* this fundamental gospel promise—and *does* something about it.

Sometimes theologians refer to a fellow scholar who has a high regard for the person and work of Christ as one with a “high” Christology. That is certainly my position, but you could also say I have a “high” ecclesiology, a high regard for the *ekklesia*, that is, the church. I happen to believe that Christ came to call and to minister through the church. But not everyone shares my view. Many people think of church as an optional part of the Christian life. I’ve known many people who felt their Christian life was just fine without the church.

Like John...It took six strong men to get John to church...in a casket. At 68 years old John was still running the family farm with 1,000 acres of Kansas wheat and soybeans. All his family went to church. His son was a deacon; his wife sang in the choir, but John never came. He said that he had accepted Christ as his Savior when he was a boy. And if he knew one thing about the Bible, it was that you don’t have to go to church to be saved. Other people could go so they could earn a better reward in heaven, but he was satisfied. He wasn’t looking for stars in his crown. He just wanted to get there, and since he had taken care of that, he didn’t think he would bother going to church.

Nancy couldn’t come to church because she loved her TV preacher. She fed on a steady diet of his Bible teaching. Over the years she contributed thousands of dollars to his TV ministry. And she told me she would probably come to our church if we didn’t have worship the same time that his show was broadcast on Sunday morning. She knew all about her TV preacher, knew about his family, knew about his trips to the Holy Land and his Bible study cruises. But her TV preacher didn’t know her. He never visited her when she was admitted to the hospital and never sent her a birthday card. But I did.

These are not two people totally devoid of faith, but they are guilty of a very *low* ecclesiology. Their stories can be repeated thousands of times by people who find all manner of excuses to avoid coming to church. I’ve never really

understood what is so hard about coming to church. It doesn't really take much commitment to get out of bed on Sunday morning and sit in a church pew for an hour. Some people must think it's like climbing Mount Everest.

Personally, I can't imagine life without church. For me, church really is life in community. And it is not just a matter of sharing time in the same building, but it's sharing sickness and health with other people who are fully aware that life is lived under the watchful care of God. In the church we get a God's-eye-view of life. And that is the main message I get from this passage in James.

I believe this passage describes life together in a local church. It's about praying, sickness, healing, sin, and confession. *"Is anyone among you sick?"* James asks. Then he responds, *"Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord"* (v. 14). How can we do that unless we are connected to a community of faith? It doesn't mean that prayers of a pastor or an elder are more powerful than anybody else. James is simply advocating the most natural thing in the world for those who are part of a church. Reach out! Ask others to offer care! Please add my name to the prayer chain! That is what normally happens when we live in a community of faith. It is that sense of community that makes life different for a Christian.

I'd also like to make some practical suggestions about how to fulfill our obligations as part of a church. But make sure you hear this amazing promise in verses 19 & 20: *"If one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins."* That could happen to you or to me. James is writing to people who believe the truth and are trying to live by it; *to people who have not wandered*. But, he says, if anyone—and that includes you and me—ever wanders and someone comes after you, don't think you are beyond rescue. And when you are the rescuer, don't get all high and mighty. Be humble and gentle.

Apparently, this was a problem in the early church, as it is today. It's not only James who writes about it. We can find references to this in Paul's letters and John's letters, even in Revelation. This theme goes back to our Lord Jesus, who

said some heartwarming things about lost sheep returning. As long as there has been a church, folks have wandered away. But as long as there is a church, the church must go after its prodigals and wanderers with this promise spurring us on: *“The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.”* **Then what is the result of prayer offered in faith? It is healing and forgiveness. Who of us doesn’t need healing and forgiveness?**

There is hope for us and for those for whom we pray. One of the most exhilarating moments in a Sunday service of worship, for me, is when we can announce to the congregation that faithful prayers we have offered have been answered by our good and gracious God. Someone has been discharged from the hospital! Someone has recovered from a serious illness! Someone for whom we have prayed has returned to health!

What can we do to bring wanderers back home? In Matthew 18 Jesus tells the parable of the wandering sheep and the persistent shepherd who leaves his other sheep to find one who wandered off. At the end of the parable, he says: *“And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.”* Listen to what the Lord says and believe it.

There was a little boy assigned to light the Christ candle on Christmas Eve, but at the last moment he balked. Frozen by fear halfway down the aisle, he said, loud enough for the entire church to hear, “I’m scared.” His dad got up, took him by the hand, and led him to the front of church where he proudly lit the Christ candle. He needed someone he trusted to lead him down the aisle.

Whether it is someone in trouble, or someone who is sick, or one of God’s wandering children, James insists that we tap into the power of God through **“prayer offered in faith.”**

If we faithfully and persistently offer our humble prayers to God, the Lord will answer, and he will lead us home. Every one of us. Amen.