

OPERATION RESCUE –DOING LIFE’S GREATEST WORK
JAMES 5:19-20

INTRODUCTION:

Do you realize that most of the lost people in our city belong to a church? Lubbock, Texas, is one of the most "churched" cities on the planet. As we do our door-to-door surveys in FAITH most of the people with whom we have conversation have some kind of relationship with a church. Many of them were baptized into membership in a church when they were infants. Some of them were confirmed in a church before their teen years. Some of them have even joined a church as a young person or as an adult. And yet the compelling evidence is that many, many of them have no saving relationship with Jesus Christ. What is the evidence of their lostness? Their daily practices is one piece of evidence. If you will observe their daily life it is obvious that Jesus Christ plays no part in the conduct of their daily lives.

Their participation is another piece of evidence. They have no pattern of participation with their church in any way. This would include many whose names we carry on the roll of our church. They never worship, pray, give, or minister.

Their very profession is a sign of their lostness. When you question them about their relationship with God, they are very nebulous about what the relationship means. They are ignorant of what the scriptures teach and have no desire to remove this ignorance.

They have no hunger after the things of God.

When you sum up all of the evidence it is obvious that they are lost.

James may have had people like this in mind in this closing word of encouragement. He closes this little letter rather abruptly with a word about rescuing those who have wandered away from the truth. The language he uses would suggest that he is talking about someone who has once been a participant in the life of the church, but has forsaken the life of the church, and is now giving evidence that they really are in danger of eternal damnation. When you compare this text with others in scripture, it becomes obvious that if you are genuinely saved you never wander from the truth. You may falter and slip for a while, but God in His loving grace brings you back. Those who wonder away and put themselves in danger of eternal condemnation have never really had that vital, saving relationship with Christ.

The burden of James is that those members of the church intentionally give themselves to rescuing these that have wandered. This is what FAITH is all about. FAITH is an organized and intentional effort of the Sunday School of First Baptist Church to rescue the lost.

I. THE REASON FOR THE LOSTNESS

James gives us insight into the reason for their lostness. They are lost because of decisions that they have made.

1. The rejection of the way of truth.

"My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth." With this statement James gives us insight into what has happened to the person. The word "wander" means to err. It means to go astray, to wander. It refers to someone who has lost his way and is wandering around aimlessly. He does not know where he is and he does not know where he is going. He does not know where he is and he does not where he is going, because he has turned his back upon the way of the truth.

By "the truth" James means the gospel, the revealed truth that God has given us, the truth of the word of God. This person has made a conscious or unconscious decision to not follow the way of truth. In a little while, the person is so lost that he has no hope of ever finding his way back without help.

If you will question your neighbor who does not attend church, in many cases he did not knowingly choose his current lifestyle. It is something that happened in his life without forethought. There are some who have intentionally and knowingly turned their back upon the faith in which they grew up. But which ever the case may be, there has been a rejection of the way of truth.

2. The selection of the way of self.

In a parallel statement James says, "Who ever turns a sinner from the error of his way." The emphasis on "the error of his way" gives us insight into why he is lost. He is lost because he chose to do things his way rather than live under the light of the truth of God. He has chosen the path of darkness rather than the path of light.

You will remember that insightful verse by the prophet Isaiah — "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). This word of the prophet reminds us that we made a selection. We have followed our own sinful inclinations and wandered away from the care of the shepherd. We have done it so selfishly that we have turned everybody else to his or her own way. We have been intent upon doing our thing in our way. Our goal has been to bring happiness to ourselves and to please ourselves. This is the way of sin.

It is this selection of the way of self that has brought about the lostness in the lives of the people of Lubbock.

II. THE REALITY OF LOSTNESS.

Woven into the fabric of this statement by James is a picture of the reality of lostness.

When a person wanders "from the truth," the person has made a tragic choice. The reality of their situation is tragic!

1. Ignorance of the condition.

Implied in this statement is this part of the reality. The person who has wandered from the truth, and become lost may be totally oblivious to the reality of their situation. They may still feel that everything is perfectly all right. They feel no sense of lostness. They will be aware that something is missing in their lives, but they will assume everyone else has the same sense of something missing.

This is what makes the task of our FAITH teams a challenge. We are often going in to the homes, standing on the doorstep, of people who have no particular sense of their true condition. A part of our task is to help them become aware of where they are and of what needs to happen in their lives.

This is the reason that it takes in many cases a number of visits in order to bring a person to Christ. Some years ago in an associational evangelism conference in Colorado, I heard the testimony of a sharp, young businessman. As he shared the pilgrimage that brought him to Christ, he could document eleven different attempts that were made to share the gospel with him. He met the first attempts with total indifference. He had no particular sense of need. He was lost, did not know it, and did not care. But as God continued to bring people into his life that shared a witness, he began to develop a concern. It was the eleventh person who had attempted to share with him the message of Christ who was successful in turning him from the error of his way.

2. In danger of death.

As James talks about the work of rescuing the lost, he indicates that one of the things that will happen is that he will "save him from death." James sees the situation of the person who has wandered from the truth as being in danger of death. Does he mean physical death, or could he be referring to spiritual death? Surely, it is spiritual death. The

consequence of selecting to follow ones own way rather than the way of truth is always spiritual and eternal death.

Did you know that 50.5 million people die each year, and that only 19.4 million are Christians. Of the 31.1 million who are not, some 12.5 million have never even heard the gospel. Think about it! 31.1 million people will die this year without any saving relationship with Jesus Christ. They are in danger of eternal death, and in many cases do not know it.

3. Under the condemnation of sin.

The other benefit that James sees coming to the person who has turned is "a cover over a multitude of sins." This does not mean that the person who rescues the lost has by his deed covered his own sins. Rather it means that when you are involved in the rescue of a lost person, you bring them to the place that they know God's forgiveness. They come under the atoning work of Jesus Christ that covers the multitude of their sins. So, the reality is that this person who has turned from the way of truth, is living under the terrible weight of condemnation from sin. This is a terrible thought! They bear upon themselves the weight of their sins day by day. They are accountable to God for every wrong word and that has come forth from their life. They are moving swiftly toward a day of judgment for which they are totally unprepared.

This is a part of the reality that contemporary man has difficulty accepting. We are not ready to see the neighbor who lives across the street who has obviously wandered from

the truth, as being under the condemnation for his sins. We prefer to believe that someday at the end, everything will work out all right for them. The reality of the situation is different! Even though the name of a church in which they held membership may appear in their obituary, the reality is that they died in their sins. They are now standing before holy God without any hope of eternal life.

III THE RESCUE FROM LOSTNESS

This is a statement about the part that you can have in rescuing someone from the error of their sinful choices. What can we learn from this passage about your part and my part in such a rescue?

1. Requires a concerned agent.

It is the nature of rescue work that it is done by people who are concerned. Someone has to care enough to do something. Someone has to care enough to reach out to that person. Someone has to share God's concern over the plight of that person.

One of the things that happen in the FAITH process is that such concern has developed. Those who have been a part of this process have become more aware of and more sensitive to the lostness of people. They have encountered situations that were a shock. They did not realize the depth of lostness until they became involved in this FAITH process. But if they are ever to be turned from the error of their way, someone must be concerned.

2. Requires a concerted effort.

Concern is not enough. Concern will never turn them from the error of their ways. That concern must be translated into an intentional action. Many of us have concern, but we have not allowed our concern to move us toward intentional action.

We are too much like the person I read about in World Magazine sometime ago. There was a factory worker who longed to see one of his fellow laborers become a believer in Christ. His witness was to befriend this fellow, to treat him kindly, not just to see him as an object but very much as a person. Theirs became the epitome of a relational witness.

Sometime later, the unbeliever became a believer, but it happened through someone else. Coming back to the factory, he spoke of his new faith to the man who had been a Christian for many years. "That's wonderful," said the first fellow. "I'm a believer too!"

"You are?" the new Christian said unbelievably, "Did you know that I have put off becoming a Christian for months just because of you? To me you were the very embodiment of someone who could be a very good person -- without Christ. I thought that maybe I, too, could become that good without having to become a Christian."

Could there be those around you who have no idea about your concern over their condition? If they are ever won to Christ, someone must intentionally become involved in the sharing of the gospel of Christ. This is what FAITH is all about. It is to equip you so that you can do that intentional thing of sharing your faith with another.

3. Rewards with a great sense of achievement

I preached from this text some years ago and used as a title, "Life's Greatest Achievement!" I felt then and still feel that as a human being you could never do anything more significant than to turn someone from the error of his way. You have done something that affects the person in time and eternity. You have done something to put them in touch with the very purpose of God. You have done something that causes the angels in heaven to rejoice. There is down deep within the heart of that person who brings others to Christ a sense of spiritual and personal achievement.

God has special rewards and special crowns reserved for those who bring others to Christ. I want you to become a part of the FAITH process so that you, too, can enter in to the joy of bringing others to Christ.

I read a book a few weeks ago by one of my favorite authors, Ken Gire. The book is on developing a reflective life. In the book, Ken gave some examples of how he has applied this in his own life. He spoke of some of the insights that have come to him from books and from movies. In his journal he had this word, "Saw the movie, Titanic, which prompted me to rent the video, A Night To Remember, an earlier version of the 1912 disaster. Several scenes leaped out to me, all involving the California, a ship that was only an hour away. It was close enough to come to Titanic's aid and rescue all on board if it had responded to the distress signals that were sent both by skyrockets and by wireless.

Tragically, the people on board failed to see or to hear the distress signals resulting in the loss of over two-thirds of the Titanic's passengers and crew."

In his reflections on that movie and the incident that he has described, "But the scenes involving the California teach another lesson. The men on board had seen the skyrockets in the distance, but they took them for the fireworks of a celebration, not a distress signal. The radio operator had taken off his headphones and gone to sleep, missing the Titanic's SOS. All of this underscores to me the importance of being attentive and responsive to the distress signals around me."

Isn't that a tragic thought? The whole tragic story of the Titanic could have had a different ending if only the crew of the California had responded! There is a story being written in the lives of hundreds of people all over this community that will have a tragic ending unless someone decides to take some dramatic action. I want to invite you not to sail on in the darkness of the night while others around you are perishing, but rather to become a part of God's gigantic rescue effort. Here at First Baptist Church we call that rescue effort FAITH. I urge you today to get off the pew and to become a part of Operation Rescue.

Alternate Introduction:

You probably never heard of Ida Lewis. I must confess that I had never heard of her until I bought about a book about her last week. The title of the book is THE KEEPER OF LIME ROCK. It was a little piece on the back of the book that prompted me to buy it. It

reads, “Over her lifetime she officially rescued 18 men and one sheep. She said it was just part of her job. But it was something more: it was courageous and extraordinary.”

Lime Rock is a lighthouse near Newport, Rhode Island. Her father appointed keeper of the lighthouse when Ida was fifteen years old, but soon suffered a debilitating stroke, and responsibility fell on Ida and her mother. In her sixteen year she made her first rescue.

Four young men were out sailing in the harbor, and drinking. They began to do the kind of things that foolish youth will do under those circumstances. As a result of their foolish acts, the capsized the boat and were in danger of being swept to an untimely death. Ida saw it all, and without hesitation decided to do what she could. She took a small boat and began to row toward them. Her father sat helpless and watched, knowing that his daughter was putting her life in jeopardy doing his job. But she was able to reach the four before they drowned, get them in her little boat, and bring them to shore safely. One of them was unconscious from the accident when she brought them ashore. Without her courageous act all four of the young men would have been lost.

In the course of her years at the Lighthouse she rescued 18 such persons, some of them under even more dangerous circumstances. She became famous up and down the east coast for her heroic deeds.

Our text is about doing for the spiritually lost what Ida did for those in physical danger.

Have ever rescued anyone from death?

