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James 5:7-12

The Way of Wisdom

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ecclesiastes 12:13, **“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”**

[Pray]

Well, here we are.

This passage wraps up the book of James. At first glance it seems like it's just a handful of practical instructions somewhat loosely strung together. Almost like James just got to the end of his scroll and realized he still needed to cram in a few more instructions. “Don't forget about prayer, remember to confess your sins, oh, and if you bring someone back who has walked away that's really good.”

That's not what is happening here.

It's not uncommon for New Testament letters to end with a handful of quick practical instructions. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is a prime example of this. First Thessalonians ends with 18 commands in the last 16 verses. Here are some practical applications.

But neither Paul, nor James here, is just kind of grabbing a bunch of random instructions out of his bag to kind of beef up the letter a bit.

Second Timothy 3:16-17 says that **“all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”** In other words, whatever passage you may be studying, whatever book, whatever chapter, whatever verse, you have not *understood* it until it transforms you. You have not understood the *meaning* of a passage until you understand the *application* of a passage.

This has been the basic idea for James. The truth must change you. Godly wisdom is knowledge that transforms you. So, the application here isn't some random instructions tacked on at the end. It's the point. The whole of the book has been heating up the blade to get it red hot, now here in these last few verses he's ready to cut.

Now, this last section doesn't capture everything he's been saying. There's been plenty of application along the way. But these last few commands get at the heart of what James has been saying. Godly wisdom shapes how you relate to God – prayer and praise. It shapes how you relate to your own sin – confession and repentance. And it shapes how you relate to others – mercy and concern for their godliness. There's a God-facing dimension. There's an others facing dimension. And there's a self-facing dimension.

I said that the first chapter is the whole book in seed form, and you could say that this last section is the whole book in fruit form. There's more to a tree than just it's fruit, but you can learn a lot from the fruit.

How do we live in light of the truth? Given the truth about God, the truth about Christ, the truth about our situation in life, how should we live? This is the suite of questions that James has been answering. This is godly wisdom. Wisdom from above.

Wisdom, we've seen, has two basic components: understanding and skill. Understanding sees the truth about the world as it really is. This is why the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Without understanding, without a bedrock knowledge of who God is that prompts a proper inward awe, there can be no wisdom. Whatever skill you may have for making money, or having a happy family, or for being healthy, it is not *wisdom* if it doesn't first understand all of these things under the all-embracing rubric of God's purposes.

But wisdom does also have skill. Proverbs 8:12, says, **“I, wisdom, dwell with prudence.”** The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but wisdom full grown has the basic skills to live in light of the truth. Godly prudence knows the right things to do and the right way to do them.

Wisdom begins in understanding and flowers in skill, in prudence.

This is what James has been driving at. To live wisely, there is a certain way that you need to see the world around you. If you are wrong about God, wrong about the world, wrong about history, wrong about human nature, no matter how smart you are, you will live foolishly. You’ll be cutting against the grain of the cosmos. And you might even get all the things you are pursuing in life, but it will all be a waste in the end. Jesus said, **“what does it profit a man to gain the whole world but forfeit his soul?”**

What James has done, which is common in the Bible, is shape our understanding by stressing concepts that stand in a certain tension with one another.

True doctrine, and true spirituality, is an attempt to understand and live in light of things that by definition transcend human understanding. And so, there are truths that the Church confesses, that we don’t pretend to understand.

God is one in essence and three in person. Christ is fully man, and fully God, without mixture or confusion, in one person without division. God is comprehensively sovereign over all things, yet without destroying genuine contingency and human accountability.

True doctrine, and importantly, true Christian living, godly wisdom, lives in the tension between these things. God forms us, he puts our souls into the right shape, by stretching us out on these tensions.

Or, to change the metaphor a bit. These contrasting concepts are like the anvil and hammer of God’s forge. He shapes you by putting you between the anvil of his one essence and the hammer of his three persons. The anvil of Christ’s one person and the hammer of his two natures. The anvil of his sovereignty and the hammer of your responsibility.

The book of James has been majoring in that last tension. On one hand James stresses God’s sovereignty, and the other he stresses your responsibility.

On the one hand, count it joy when you face various trials. He brought you forth by the word of truth. True wisdom comes down from above, not from within. What is your life? A mist and vapor. You should say, “if God wills.”

And on the other hand, be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. Be a doer, not a hearer only. Show no partiality. Choose wisdom from above. You do not have because you do not ask.

Wisdom from above sees the tension, and lives in light of both poles.

In these last few verses, James gives us three basic instructions that touch on three tensions. Three anvil-hammer pairs that should shape our lives, that will shape us little by little into godly wisdom.

These are really simple, and we’ve seen them throughout this book.

Verses 13-15, trust God.

Verses 16-18, walk humbly.

Verses 19-20, be merciful.

Trust God, walk humbly, be merciful.

Verses 13-15

Let’s start with verses 13 through 15.

¹³Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

¹⁴Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

¹⁵And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

There are a few angles we could take to consider these verses. Here's the big thing I want you to see. Live like God is in control. From the very beginning, this has been one of James' main points. "Count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds." Why? How? Because God is in control.

Are you suffering? Pray. Why? To make yourself feel better? No, because God is in control. Are you cheerful? Are things going well? Sing praise. To who? Why? To God, because he is in control. Is anyone sick? This is an easy one to lose the plot on a bit. Again, are you supposed to hope in the elders? Are you supposed to hope in the oil? No, **"The Lord will raise him up."** If you've committed sins, God will forgive.

Live like God is in control. Ask him for help. Thank him for the good things.

There is one thing I want to note that you will see throughout this passage. Note that each of these instructions assumes that the Christian life happens in the context of a covenant church. Throughout James we've seen a vision for wise Christian living, not as an isolated individual, and not generally with other Christians, but as a member of a church. Note that he doesn't say, call for some of your Christian buddies. But call for the elders.

New Testament Christian life is church life. This is why church membership matters. The New Testament everywhere assumes that it is talking to members of definite churches who know who the elders are and who know who one another are.

Ok, what's the main point of this instruction? The life of wisdom from above rests on the solid conviction that God is in control. In the hard times, God is in control – if you are going to have relief, first and foremost it will come from him. In the good times, God is in control – thank him, praise him, delight in his kindness.

Ok, what's the tension? What's the anvil and hammer? Here the anvil is God's absolute sovereign providence, and the hammer is God's personality, God's freedom.

Meaning, the life of Christian wisdom is shaped by two dueling beliefs held humbly. First, God is working out his plan in and for history, down to the trajectory and destiny of every floating particle of dust. This of course includes human wills.

I like to ask people, how much of history is dependent on human wills? How could God be in any sense sovereign over history if he isn't sovereign over human choices? Isaiah 46:9-10, **"I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'"** He sees the end because he decrees the end.

But second, human life operates within genuine contingency and decisions are really meaningful. Prayer matters. You do not have because you do not ask.

Providence is not the same thing as fate. God's will in the world is not an impersonal force carrying on unconcerned for human creatures. God hears your prayer, he answers your prayer. He hears your praise.

Christian wisdom avoids two errors. Stoic fatalism and open theism. Stoic fatalism says that history and your life are impersonally determined, so you might as well just accept your lot in life. And open theism says that God doesn't really control your life because people's choices are outside of his control. So, pray, and God would help you if he could, but sometimes his hands are tied.

But, Christian wisdom says, God is in control of every detail, so pray.

The tension is between personality, freedom in God, and law.

I talked about this a bit during one of the apologetics lessons in Foundations.

Here's the high-level summary. Every worldview outside of the Bible reduces the universe to either personality or law. Contingency, freedom, or regularity.

Personality means that the universe is governed at bottom by personal forces that are free and thus unpredictable. All apparent regularity in the world is really just personal forces choosing to act with some regularity. It's an unstable regularity. This is classic paganism with its fertility and storm gods. The good harvest comes because the corn gods were pleased. The famine because they were upset.

This is very common, and very visible in history. Think the gods of Egypt, pagan Rome, Thor and his thunderbolts. In this world, order is an illusion that rests somewhat insecurely on personal forces.

On the other hand, law means that at bottom, the universe is governed by impersonal forces. This is Greek philosophy, this is the more philosophical side of Hinduism, this is modern secularism. Whatever apparent personality there may be can be completely reduced to impersonal, mechanistic forces.

So, for modern secularism, all personality is an illusion. Personality can be reduced to psychology. Psychology can be reduced to biology. Biology can be reduced to chemistry. Chemistry can be reduced to physics. So all of your choices are really just atoms bouncing around aimlessly.

With personality you have a meaningful universe, but no stability or direction. With law you have a stable universe with direction, but no meaning. The dominoes don't mean anything when they fall, only a personality can mean anything by anything.

The Bible, and the Bible alone, presents a world that is at bottom both personality and law. Neither one is behind the other. Because the universe is sustained by a personal God, the universe is shot through with meaning. Just like every detail in a novel means something to the author, so every detail in the universe means something to the Creator.

And because the universe rests on the will of the unchanging God, the universe is fundamentally stable and directed.

God's unchanging will is the anvil. God's genuine personality and freedom is the hammer. If we compromise either, we end up with a disfigured spirituality. Either philosophical fatalism, or pagan uncertainty.

Are you suffering? Pray to God, because he is in control. Pray to God because he is a person, he will hear you he cares about you. If you don't ask, he won't give.

Are you cheerful? Praise God because he is sovereign, from eternity past he decreed to give you a good day today. Praise God because he is a person, he is a Father who delights to please his children. Psalm 139:16, **"In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."**

This is the first step of Godly wisdom. Trust God. He is the sovereign law at the base of the cosmos, and he is your Father in heaven, who loves you dearly.

16-18

Next, verses 16 through 18, walk humbly. Here, James moves into the importance of the confession of sin in the life of the Christian.

Starting in verse 16,

"Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. ¹⁷Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit."

The example of Elijah in these verses isn't just a random aside on the power of prayer. It is a picture of confession and restoration through prayer.

In verse 15 James moves from physical sickness to spiritual sickness.¹ Sometimes we can get tripped up by the image of salvation as healing, but there's really no reason to. Jesus uses this same image in Mark 2:17. He is the doctor who has come to heal the sick.

¹ *"That ye may be healed"—The word is of a general use, and implieth freedom from the diseases either of soul or body, and the context suiteth with both; for he speaketh promiscuously of sins and sickness,"* Manton, *Commentary on James*, 462.

There are basically three forms of this spiritual sin-sickness. First, there is the guilt of sin. You can think of this like the cancer of sin. This will kill you.

Second, there is the guilt-feelings of sin. This is more or less the stung conscience from sin, and the spiritual sense of dereliction in sin. God's Fatherly frown over our sin. You can think of this like the flu. It will certainly be unpleasant for a while, but treated right, you can do something about it.

Then third, there is the habit and disposition of sin. I don't really have a good health analogy here. Maybe allergies? An inborn predisposition to react to certain stimuli in bad ways?

Jesus came to heal us from all of these. On the cross, Christ once for all dealt with our spiritual cancer. He took it all into himself and took it to the grave. Through repentance and faith, Jesus will remove your cancer of guilt, with no chance of it coming back.

For the Christian, this first form of spiritual sickness is done with. Christ has answered for all of your sin and guilt past, present, and future. Romans 8:1, **"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."**

But the second and third form, so long as you are in the flesh, you will continue to have to deal with.

And this is why the New Testament so often tells us to confess our sins, and to seek forgiveness.

We can get into some confusing theological territory if we don't know how to tell the difference between what we could call primary and secondary forgiveness – or even if we don't know that there is a difference.

Primary forgiveness is that once for all time forgiveness of all sin before the bar of cosmic justice. This is justification. This is adoption. This is where God says, you are no longer my enemy, now you are my son, my daughter.

Secondary forgiveness is where God releases you from the sting in your conscience due to some particular sin. Where there is a feeling of spiritual dereliction, where it feels that God is distant because of some sin. This is the Fatherly discipline of God. You have been adopted already, you are never any less adopted, but you are under discipline in and through your own conscience.

This is the main kind of healing that James is talking about. Remember, he's writing to Christians. So, they have already been given the primary forgiveness, they've already been healed from their guilt-cancer.

In 1 John 1, John says the same thing. Those who walk in the light, who walk in confession of their sin, have fellowship with each other, and with God. First John 1:9, **"if we confess our sins (those who already have fellowship with God), he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."**

I think this is such an important verse for this idea. Because God has already granted you primary forgiveness in Jesus Christ, his secondary forgiveness is now a matter of justice. God is **"faithful and just to forgive us."** But we have to confess.

Psalms 51 is the classic text for this kind of secondary forgiveness. This is a prayer of David asking for this kind of secondary forgiveness. He already belongs to God, he's already been justified, but he's sinned big. Psalm 51:8, **"let the bones that you have broken rejoice."** Verse 10, **"create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."** Verse 12, **"Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit."**

This is the prayer of a Christian – forgiven through the blood of the lamb, justified by faith, adopted by grace – asking for forgiveness and restoration.

There are two common errors that we can fall into if we don't understand this distinction between primary and secondary forgiveness. When we sin, if we don't get this distinction, we can either read too much into our guilt-feelings, or we can try to psychologize them away. We either theologize them, or we psychologize them.

If we try to theologize guilt-feelings then we interpret our guilty conscience as proof that we aren't really Christians after all. We aren't really forgiven in the first place.

If we try to psychologize them, then we basically try to make ourselves not feel bad about our sin because we've been forgiven and justified in Christ. We think that because Jesus has dealt with the penalty of our sin, we should never experience a guilty conscience.

Both of these are serious errors that can have massive consequences. The theologizing error leads to despair, and sometimes an outright abandonment of the faith. “If I’m not a Christian anyway, why bother.” And the psychologizing error leads to a seared conscience and a therapeutic gospel where self-esteem replaces faith.

Christian, in Christ you have been adopted. Christ has paid for all of your sin, once and for all. And he has lived a perfect life for your righteousness. None of your present sin can create the slightest rift between you and God your Father. And yet, when you sin, your conscience is *meant* to discipline you. You should feel bad about your sin. In fact, the more you grow in grace, the more your sin will bother you.

Parents, whose children do you discipline? Yours? Or someone else’s? God’s discipline for your sin, often through your stung conscience, is proof that he claims you as his child.

And this brings us back to confession. God has given us a means of addressing our sin. When we sin, we are meant to confess it. This doesn’t always have to be to another person. John doesn’t mention anyone but God, but James here does, there are times where we should confess to one another.

The two errors about primary and secondary forgiveness more or less map onto the two errors about confession as well. There’s the error that sees confession as a sacrament to restore primary forgiveness. In this error, one thinks that he needs to confess his sin to a priest in order to be re-adopted and re-saved – at least restored to a state of grace.

Then there’s the error on the other side that spiritualizes confession down so much that you never really confess your sin – not even to God in private prayer. You feel bad about your sin. You beat yourself up about your sin. But you never actually humble yourself before God to confess and ask for forgiveness. In other words, you skip right to repentance without any confession.

Sometimes confession to God alone is enough. But sometimes God will keep stinging our conscience until we confess to someone else. And here, he doesn’t have in mind the kind of confession where you are asking someone else for forgiveness, where you sinned against the other person. If you sin against someone, you need to confess and ask for forgiveness.

What James is talking about is the confession where you find a mature godly Christian, could be one of your pastors or elders, but doesn’t necessarily have to be, and confess your sin to them. Then, they receive it, remind you of the gospel, and pray for God to restore you and shower his mercy on you.

There is a way that sometimes God chooses to only give these spiritual blessings through the prayers of others.

And this is why James brings in the example of Elijah here. Israel had sinned grievously. She had turned away from God to idols, and God had withheld rain for over three years. Then, when Elijah prayed, God sent rain and restored the land.

There was a spiritual breach of fellowship between God and Israel. Israel was still God’s chosen people, but she was under severe discipline. She was parched, barren, fruitless.

Then, through Elijah’s prayer, she is restored, and rejuvenated.

This is a picture of your spiritual life around this secondary forgiveness. Because of your sin, whatever it was, that you haven’t confessed yet, you are living in a period of spiritual desert. Confession then is going to Elijah to have him pray for you. It’s through this prayer, through the righteous man, that God restores you to spiritual health, vitality, and fruitfulness.

Ok, two quick notes before moving on. First, not every spiritual desert season is because of unconfessed sin. It might be, and you need to seriously wrestle with it, and maybe even ask someone to speak into your life if they think that might be the case. But it might not be.

God tends to be pretty clear with these things. If we are willing to hear him God will let us know what the problem is. Israel was wildly idolatrous. The problem was obvious to anyone who cared to look.

If there is unconfessed sin in your life that God has you in a desert for, you probably already know what it is, even if you don’t have the courage to be honest with yourself yet. Pray for that courage.

Second, it's important to note what James says about Elijah, or who you should be confessing to.

Note first, that in verse 16, James calls him – or this person who is praying – a righteous person. Certainly, there should be a measure of godly maturity in this person, but he's not talking about perfection. He's simply talking about God's willingness to hear and answer prayers from his justified people. Those who are justified *in* Christ are seated *with* Christ at the throne of grace. You have his ear.

Then second, note that in the ways that are relevant here, Elijah is just like us. He's mature, but he's not a super Christian. Or at least that's not what James is pointing to.

James adds that comment that Elijah "was a man with a nature like ours," to make sure that we didn't think that this only applies to super Christians. Elijah was special in a lot of ways, but at bottom he was just like us.

Interestingly, James uses a word for nature here that literally means, "of like passions." The KJV translates that phrase as Elijah was "subject to like passions as we are."

In light of all that James has said about *passions* so far, I like that rendering. Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are. It's not just that Elijah was a human like you and me. That's true enough. But he was subject to the *same passions* as you and me. The same inner war.

Elijah's prayer wasn't effective because he was sinless. He wasn't. Elijah's prayer was effective because he was *justified*.

So, James instructs us to confess our sins to one another not to get re-saved, or re-justified, but to be restored and revived. Restored to spiritual health and life. Restored to fruitfulness.

Here's the point for this section: the way of wisdom isn't about pretending to be sinless, but about dealing with our sin Christianly.

Christian wisdom is the pursuit of holiness that understand that the first step of true holiness is the quick confession of sin. This is humility. There is no holiness without humility.

John Webster, a leading theologian of the last generation or so, has a quote on this in his book on *Holiness* that I happened to stumble on last Sunday that I think really well captures this idea. Webster says, "far from being a matter of confident purity, holiness is visible as humble acknowledgement of sin and as prayer for forgiveness... It is in repentance, rather than in the assumption of moral pre-eminence, that holiness is visible."²

Note that, true holiness is confession and repentance. One without the other is a distortion of true biblical holiness.

This is the second tension, the second anvil and hammer.

The way of wisdom is both confession (owning your sin, admitting your sin) and repentance (turning from your sin, pursuing uprightness). Confession is the acknowledgement of sin and your need for mercy. Repentance is the diligent turning from sin to uprightness.

Repentance without confession is a subtle hiding of your sin or merely downplaying your sin and trying to just make up for it by doing better next time. Instead of getting Elijah to pray for rain, you just try digging better irrigation ditches for your fields. That's all well and good, but you need to get right with God first.

Then confession without repentance is just a wallowing in your sin. You'll confess your sin, but you would kind of prefer to stay in the desert.

This is probably the more dangerous error in our day simply because this is the ditch that the winds of the culture blow us toward.

You could call this the *authenticity gospel*. And it is a false gospel.

Instead of repenting of our sin, turning from it, and putting it to death, we're tempted to just kind of own it as our identity. Somehow, we seem to think that the more we make much of our weaknesses, sins, and flaws, the

² John Webster, *Holiness*, 73.

more authentic we are. And the more we make much of our desire to overcome our weaknesses, put to death our sin, and fix our flaws, the more we're fake, or legalists, or hypocrites.

This is very bad.

This is very dangerous. The world's therapeutic, self-esteem, authenticity gospel basically says, discover yourself, accept yourself, be yourself, and if anyone doesn't fully embrace your definition of yourself, then cut them out of your life. This is how the world trains teenagers to hold their parents hostage. "Accept this crazy new perversion I've adopted, or I'm going to cut you out of my life and say it's your fault."

And, in this worldview what constitutes your "authentic self" only ever includes transgressive things. By definition, biblical standards, traditional standards, and parental standards are all repressive forces hindering your authentic self.

The world says, be yourself. The gospel says, die to yourself.

C.S. Lewis, in his essay, "the Sermon and the Lunch," makes this point really well. He is reflecting on the strange fact that we tend to be the least well behaved toward the people we live with. The basic point he is making is that we are the worst to the people we live with because that is where we feel the most comfortable to be ourselves. Then he says,

If a man can't be comfortable and unguarded, can't take his ease and 'be himself' in his own house, where can he? That is, I confess, the trouble. The answer is an alarming one. There is *nowhere* this side of heaven where one can safely lay the reins on the horse's neck. It will never be lawful simply to 'be ourselves' until 'ourselves' have become sons of God.³

The way of wisdom is shaped between the anvil of confession and the hammer of repentance. The way of wisdom requires both the self-awareness to confess your sin and shortcomings, and the humility to zealously pursue uprightness. Wisdom confesses your sin, but it never identifies with it.

This is only possible because of the cross. Only because of the cross can we own our sin and not be owned by it. Christ died to take away the penalty and power of your sin. You have nothing to lose in confession. The penalty has already been paid. And because you've been set free, you've actually been given the power to walk in uprightness. And you have no excuse to just wallow in your sin.

Washed in the blood of Christ, you don't have to pretend to be something you're not. And filled with the Spirit of Christ, you are enabled to pursue uprightness without hypocrisy.

Your sin does not own you. You can confess it.

Your sin does not own you. You can leave it behind.

19-20: Mercy

The way of wisdom trusts God, walks in humility, and third, the way of wisdom has mercy on one another. Trust, humility, then last, *mercy*.

I hope that you've started to see how big of a deal mercy is to James. The church is not marked off from the world by the lack of sin, but by how we deal with sin.

Let's read this passage, verses 19 and 20, **"My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."**

Here, James basically takes the same principle from the last section and addresses the other guy. The last point was, 'find an Elijah to pray for you.' This point is, 'be an Elijah to pray for others.'

³ C.S. Lewis, "The Sermon and the Lunch," in *God in the Dock*, 317.

In humility we need to walk in both confession and repentance. And in mercy, we need to deal with others both mercifully and redemptively. Meaning, in mercy, we should humbly receive their confession and freely offer them gospel reconciliation and pardon. Not minimizing sin, but holding out Christ to them freely and fully.

Then, with an eye to redemption, we should be eager to get them back on the path of repentance and life change.

James says, “if anyone wanders from the truth...” He’s making the point that, in the life of the church, there are going to be some who wander. Some might outright walk away, leave the church, renounce the faith. In God’s grace, it’s not uncommon for many of these to come back. Like the prodigal son, they run out of the resources of their Christian inheritance, realize that the world is a pigsty, and come home.

Or sometimes people “wander from the truth” without ever leaving the church. They don’t renounce the faith, but they are just not living right.

On the mercy side, there are three things we should see in what James is saying here. First, don’t write those people off. Even though they have wandered, maybe they have even wandered far, there is still hope for them. As long as they have breath in their lungs, there is still hope for them.

Second, he can come back, he’s allowed to come back. The door is open to him, and the church should receive him back.

Third, it’s a really good thing if he comes back. God’s grace is not a narrow, suspicious thing. Again, like the story of the prodigal son, the father didn’t receive the returning son like a servant, but he threw a party for him to celebrate his resurrection.

Note that in the last phrase, James says, he will “cover a multitude of sins.” Now, to be clear, you are an instrumental cause. God is the one who covers the sins.

We’re not supposed to receive him with suspicion, demanding a full accounting of all of his sins and errors while he was wandering.

If he walked away from the faith, you can guarantee that skipping church wasn’t his only sin. But if he comes back, that’s all covered by the blood of Christ. **“It [is] fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”⁴**

Ok, then the redemption side. Mercy is the anvil, and redemption the hammer. Again, true spirituality, godly wisdom, lives between these two forces.

If we are only mercy, then we will just end up letting people wallow in their sin, and ultimately their soul will not be saved from death. And, this is not really mercy.

And if we are only redemption, only oriented toward life change, we will be suspicious and cynical toward those who wander. And again, this is not really redemption at all.

True mercy aims at life-change. And true redemption begins with mercy.

We can learn three things about redemption in this passage too.

First, redemption looks like pursuit. We see this modeled first and foremost in Christ. He came to redeem us, he didn’t wait for us to come to him.

Notice the spatial imagery that James uses here. “If someone wanders... someone brings him back.” Your buddy wandered off into the desert. How do you bring him back? You go out and find him.

Proverbs 27:6, **“Faithful are the wounds of a friend.”**

Sometimes we don’t even know that we wandered until one of our friends gives us a faithful wound.

Then also note the clarity of redemption. James calls the one who wanders a sinner. Just like before, the “righteous person” isn’t one who is personally perfectly righteous, but covenantally righteous in Christ. In the same way, “the sinner” isn’t one who even necessarily sins more or worse than the Christians, but he is covenantally outside the blessing of Christ.

⁴ Luke 15:32

In other words, and this roles into the next point, redemption is clear-eyed about what's going on. Wandering from the truth is no trivial thing.

Then last, James doubles down on the seriousness of redemption. You save his soul from death.

So, the way of wisdom in church community is merciful toward those who wander, while at the same time not backing down an inch about the seriousness of sin. Mercy with an eye to redemption.

The way of wisdom: trust, humility, mercy.

Conclusion

This is how James wraps up his book. He gives us a handful of practical instructions. Hopefully you can see now that these aren't just a random fistful of Christian things to do, but sum up the substance of what James has been getting at this whole time.

Are you having a hard time? Pray to God. He cares, he hears, he is in control, he is wise, he is good, he is doing something in you through this.

Are you having a good time? Don't read too much into it, all the glories of this earth are passing away, and yet, sing! Rejoice. Praise God. All these good things come from him.

Are you sick? Call your elders. Don't forget to live life together as a church.

Don't be deceived by sin, it leads to death. Whatever it's offering you, it won't deliver. All good gifts come down from above, from the same God who saved you through the preaching of the gospel.

So be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. And when you fall short, confess your sins to one another, and just like God revived the land when Elijah prayed, so God will revive you.

But don't be deceived, don't be a hearer only, but be a doer. Don't show partiality. The gospel tears down the dividing walls. Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. True faith is seen in true works. When God waters you with the rain of his grace, you will bear fruit. When Elijah prays and the rain comes, the land bears fruit.

So be slow with your tongue. Don't burn the house down with flaming darts at one another. Don't be envious, don't be jealous. What good has God not given you in the gospel? All things are yours. Christ is yours. The apostles are yours. The world is yours. He sent his Son to die for you, and his Spirit to live in you. What more do you need? Wisdom from above is not jealous or violent, but pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Draw near to God. Let him wash you. Let him lead you. Get off his chair. You aren't the judge. Who are you to speak against his servants. Let him deal with his own. Who are you to say how your life is supposed to turn out. What are you? A mist. A vapor. Vanity of vanities.

Pay attention. There are two paths. A path of life, and a path of death. The fear of the Lord is your guide here. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Sometimes the path of life looks like death, and you shrink back. And sometimes the path of death looks like life, and it calls you in. But what is it worth to gain the whole world and lose your soul?

You'll need each other here. If one of you wanders off the path of life onto the path of death, you better hope that someone comes and finds you and brings you back to the path of life, the path of wisdom.

If he does, he has saved your soul and covered a multitude of sins.

"The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."⁵

⁵ Ecclesiastes 12:13.