

## Live and Let Die

*19 Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, 20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. (Jam 5:19-20)*

A new Golden Rule has replaced the old Golden Rule. The old Golden Rule came from the Sermon on the Mount: Do to others what you would have done to you. The new Golden Rule is simply: "Live and let live". Live your life the way you want to, and let others live life the way they want to. Don't interfere, don't judge, and don't preach. Let people live life the way they want to, and as long as they aren't hurting anyone, just leave them alone.

That's the motto of the new sexuality. Live and let live. Canada's supreme court gave a constitutional right to what in Roman times was simply called an orgy, and a recent statutory ruling seems aimed at doing the same for the "love" of animals. I think it is not long before we'll see forms of paedophilia protected by the law.

Live and let live, they say. And of course, in a secular society, we agree that neighbours should not use force or violence to harm those they disagree with. But *live and let live* has come to be very one-sided in our culture. It has come to mean not only that Christians must accept the reality of these things now existing in the open in our society, but that we must co-operate in endorsing them, and be silent if we object. Tolerance has come to mean complete submission to the new order. Don't object, don't write letters, don't engage in constructive debate, don't conduct your own church or business according to conscience. No, *live and let live* has come to mean, accept other's lifestyles as if you approved of them yourself. And once we do that, we have actually abandoned the Word of God as our authority.

The pressure is on for Christians to not simply co-exist with other religions or with practitioners of sins we abominate, the pressure is on to mute our beliefs, make every concession to the liberal agenda, and privatise our faith. *Live and let live* means for the Christian, if you don't like it, too bad, keep it to yourself. Because ironically, if you raise your voice or object in the public square, they will not live and let live, they will demand that you change.

Christians have to navigate an increasingly hostile secular environment. This live-and-let-live atmosphere can slowly erode our convictions, until we find that we are becoming that way even within the church. We can so inhale the toxic fumes of pseudo-tolerance that we end up mimicking that behaviour in the church. But if there is one place on Earth where live and let live is not to be practised, it is the church.

The church is not a secular society, where people of opposing beliefs and practices must find a way to live together peacefully. The church is a redeemed body of people, with the same Father, the same Saviour, the Same Spirit, the same faith, the same Bible, the same Gospel. We are very different, each one unique, gifted differently, shaped differently, but all coming under the sound of one authority, shaping our minds and hearts to be of one mind and one heart. So our goal is not to be widely different and live and let live. Our goal is to strive together to be conformed to Christ.

*13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; (Eph 4:13)*

That means we do the opposite of what the world means by live and let live. We actually get involved in one another's lives and help each other stay on the path of Christlikeness. We don't simply ignore each other, and say, "Well, if that's how he wants to live, that's his life." We take up a biblical responsibility to encourage, to restore, to rebuke, to warn.

Because in the Bible's theology, to simply leave others to their own devices is to live and let die. To act hands-off of others is to allow them to fall into sin and eventually destruction.

This is how James wants to end his letter. He wants to exhort us away from 'live and let live' in the church, because it is actually live and let die. To leave people to wander away from the truth is to watch them as they progress towards the edge of a cliff. James wants us to protect the real faith not only in ourselves but in others. So instead of ending his letter with formal greetings, he ends his letter with an exhortation not to live and let live. You could say he is going to tell us to live and save life. Unlike the rest of his letter, these verses are not commands. This text reports three realities we need to know to live and save life. What is implied is that we must understand these truths so as to save life within the church.

## **I. People Will Wander**

*19 Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth*

James is reporting a real phenomenon. He is not bringing up something that never happens, but something that does happen, and will happen in every faithful church at some point. The only reason for the word 'if' is to tell us what ought to happen when this occurs, not to cast doubt on the fact that it does.

Within the church, people who have claimed to be Christians, people who have given their testimony of salvation in front of the church will wander from the truth. They will deviate from the path of believing sound doctrine. They will wander away from the path of practising the truth in holiness and Christlike obedience. They will steadily leave the orbit of orthodoxy, orthopraxy and orthopathy and begin wandering into heterodoxy, heteropraxy, heteropathy.

In fact, that's what this Greek word for wander – *planeithe* – refers to. The Greeks looked up into the night sky and they noticed that most of the stars followed a completely regular pattern of rising and setting. But then they noticed a few that did very odd things. These stars would seem to follow a course, and then they would slow down, stop, and then turn around and go the opposite way. They couldn't understand what was going on, and they called these stars wandering stars. Now what was happening is that these wandering stars were Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. And when the Earth's orbit overtakes the orbit of another, from the perspective of Earth, it looks as if it slows down and goes the opposite direction. So these heavenly bodies they called *asteres planeitai*, wandering stars, and that's where the English word planets is derived from. Wanderers.

The Bible wants us to know that in the church of Christ, not everyone is going to keep to the regular orbit of believing the truth, behaving the truth, and loving the truth. You are going to see people suddenly break from the orbit and seem to go the opposite way.

Why is that? The answer is, deception. The human heart is so prone to deception from without and from within. Throughout this letter, James has taught us how easy it is to think we have the real faith, when we have a false faith. He's talked about the true faith in terms of how it faces trials, how it receives God's Word, how it treats strangers or the poor, how it uses the tongue, what kind of wisdom it uses, what kind of relationships it has, how it judges, how it spends, how it waits, how it prays. And all along, James has warned us against self-deception. He has shown us how easy it is for us to be hearers only, or substitute intention for action, or praise God while cursing man, or use our worldly wisdom, or stay in cycles of conflict and blame others. It is so easy to wander off the path of real faith. The human heart is like a really faulty compass. It goes off course unless continually corrected.

Scripture is very pessimistic about the human heart's sense of direction when left to itself, and you should be too. If you have the belief that left to yourself, you will figure it out, you won't get lost, you'll end up in a good place, then you didn't get that belief from the Bible. Maybe you got it from your family, from Oprah, from talk radio, from a motivational speaker, but you didn't get it from Scripture.

God says about the human heart:

*Jer 17:9 "The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?"*

**Pro 3:5** *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding;*

**Pro 28:26** *He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, But whoever walks wisely will be delivered.*

*3 O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps. (Jer 10:23)*

Think of how many Proverbs speak about the importance of correction, of receiving rebuke, of the importance of being teachable and not stubborn. Why would all these Proverbs be necessary if we were self-directing?

In fact, when God chooses an image to explain what we are like and what we need and who he is, what animal does He choose? He chooses the image of sheep and shepherd. Why? Because sheep are prone to wander, and end up lost. *6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; (Isa 53:6)*

There are plenty of animals in the world that do not get lost, and have an almost uncanny sense of direction. But Jesus did not say, I am the Trainer, and you are my homing-pigeons. He did not say, I am the north pole, and you are migrating birds. He did not say, I am the scent and you are the bloodhounds. Lots of images in nature could have served if we had an innate sense of coming right, being sensible, doing the right thing, landing up where we need to.

One of the things about getting lost is that no one tries to do it on purpose. You get lost precisely because you believe you know where you're going. You have confidence in your direction until you land up in a place that is very far from where you should be. No one sits in counselling with a pastor with a very distressing situation and says, "I meant to be here. This is the destination I was aiming for."

One of first signs of maturity in a Christian is a healthy distrust of listening to your own heart, and a deep teachability, desiring guidance from God's Word. Every one of us should agree with the words of the hymn:

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,  
Prone to leave the God I love;  
Here's my heart, O take and seal it;  
Seal it for Thy courts above.*

And if we know that proneness in our own hearts, we should be ready to see it in others, and be ready to act. We should be ready, not to be indifferent, not to say 'live and let live', but to use the Golden Rule – if I were wandering off the path, and still believed I was on it, what would I want others to do? If people were not prone to wander, then yes, the most loving thing you could do for others is leave them alone. But a biblical view of the human heart understands people are prone to wander, and we need to be ready to restore.

Now there's a reason for this, and it is that wandering from the truth has serious consequences.

## II. Wanderers Will Die

*20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.*

The person who wanders from the way is in danger of death through a multitude of uncovered sins. The person who wanders from the truth is not a child who wanders a little too far from the family picnic, but is still safe. No, the person who wanders away from the truth is wandering into the territory that is going to be carpet-bombed by God's judgement. A wanderer from the truth is straying onto a slope that gets steeper the further you go, more slippery the further you go, and darker, and at the bottom of that slope is Hell.

That's what's at stake here: life and death, sins covered, or sins clinging, salvation or damnation. Now perhaps you are asking, I thought James was addressing Christians. Didn't he say, if one *among you* wanders from the way? Does that mean a Christian can lose his salvation, and end up spiritually dead?

The Bible does not teach that genuinely saved people can lose their salvation. You will search in vain to see Scripture speaking about true salvation ever being reversed: you don't ever read of regenerated people being unborn again, losing their reserved inheritance, being unadopted by God, unforgiven of the debt forgiven, or of God reversing the transaction of imputation, unelecting them, unsealing them. All the images of salvation speak of permanence and completion.

But the Bible does teach the very real phenomenon of apostasy. The word apostasy means falling away. Now to fall away means you have to have some kind of position to begin with. Apostasy is the very real phenomenon in Scripture of the people who seem saved, both to themselves and to others at one time. But then these same people who appear to have been saved turn back and renounce the Christ that saved them. Not all of them renounce Christ with their lips. But as Titus 1:16 says, *16 They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work. (Tit 1:16)*

On the outside, they look as if they have escaped the world. They themselves will speak of having experienced salvation, of the Spirit living within them, of a new life. There's a side to these people where they have experienced something. Hebrews 6 describes them as *enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, (Heb 6:4-5)*

They are that third soil, where the seed sprouts, and it looks alive, and fruit even seems to be coming, until it is choked with thorns, riches, cares of this world. An apostate has experienced a certain kind of knowledge of Christ, a certain deepened experience of heavenly things. He or she has changed in knowledge, had some spiritual experiences, perhaps at one point felt the Holy Spirit deeply illuminating him or her.

*20 For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. 21 For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. 22 But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire." (2Pe 2:20-22)*

But it remains on the level of knowledge, of cognition, of ideas. Something has not yet happened, and it is the death of the old man, and the invasion from above of a new nature. Because when the new nature is present, however much the Christian may fall, however much he or she may wrestle

with doubt, that new nature will keep coming back to Christ.

The apostate has had light, and knowledge, and a taste of spiritual things, but there comes a moment when the apostate's old nature is revealed to be the only thing that is there. The old Adam, devoted to self, under the lordship of self, following self. For every apostate the wandering begins when at some point, the demands of Christ become too much. It's different for everyone. It could be something about the Gospel he finds too easy and can't handle. It might be a mystery – the Trinity, the Incarnation. It might be because he doesn't see a prayer answered. It might be because he is tired of obeying and continuing to obey Christ simply seems too much. It might be because he can't see how trusting God will get him what he wants. For Judas, it came at the point when he saw that Jesus was not going to be the political Messiah he wanted, and large financial gain was not coming his way. But at some point, he will throw off the yoke of Christ, because he is not a sheep, he is a goat. He will wander from the truth.

And the result will be sin and more sin. When I think of those who have been in our church, professed Christ, but then wandered from the truth – in which of the cases have they become holier, and sinned less? Apostasy leads to a growing shipwreck of the life, multiplied problems, increased sin.

When a wanderer keeps wandering, sin abounds. Something worse happens. The conscience hardens, and becomes more and more seared. The further the person wanders from the faith, the more justified he or she feels. They are on a one-way path to hell, and accelerating as they go.

So what is the responsibility laid on Christians?

### **III. Christians Must Rescue Wanderers**

*if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, 20 let him know that he who turns a sinner*

Both in verse 19 and verse 20, the word for turns is the idea of getting hold of the wanderer and getting them back to the path. James is saying, this is possible, and this is a good thing. Instead of live and let live, Christians are supposed to actively intervene when they see the wandering of another believer. Every Christian is to have a shepherd's heart.

*Matthew 18:12 "What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? (Mat 18:12)*

Now, maybe someone asks, How can you turn an apostate back? Could Judas have been turned back? The answer is, you won't turn back everyone you attempt this with. On the night of Christ's arrest, twelve apostles wandered from the truth. But Jesus brought eleven of them back. They weren't apostate. They wandered, but they were brought back, which meant their souls were saved, and a multitude of sin had been prevented.

The ones that come back are not apostate, they are just Christians who needed to be restored. But had they stayed on that path of wandering, had repeated attempts to restore been rejected, it may be that the person had never truly come to Christ, and was now manifesting that rejection of His lordship.

You and I don't know the state of someone's heart. You can only tell the trajectory of their choices. And if that trajectory is wandering from the truth, you have a God-given obligation to urge the wanderer back onto the path. James specifically gives you hope that there will be a success rate for

this action.

How do you know if someone is wandering? When do you do this and for whom? When we see someone who begins to disappear from regular attendance, when we see someone whose countenance shows signs of spiritual weariness and withdrawal, when we hear that someone is contemplating making a very serious error, when a Christian has demonstrated a persistent pattern of neglecting the means of grace, we are to get involved. When we hear of a pattern of sin, a kind of living that is unlike Christ, when we see a pattern of speech or thinking or acting which is ungodly, we do not live and let live. We want to preserve life and prevent sin.

So what do you do if you want to restore someone who is wandering, and how do you do it? You should probably think about three levels of restoration.

Level one is encouraging the discouraged. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 says, “*comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, (1Th 5:14)*. Probably the bulk of wandering is corrected this way. This is simply coming alongside someone who is wandering and providing strength and refreshment. You tell him he is not alone in his struggle. You remind him that God has promises in the Word for Him. You remind Him of the grace promised to those who obey. You remind Him of eternity and reward and our hope. You explain how you have struggled and the grace that was given to overcome. You tell him you are praying for him. You find out where you can bear his excess burdens.

**Heb 12:12** *Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.*

Level two is warning the disobedient. Usually someone is both discouraged and disobedient, so you will also be encouraging, but now along with the encouragement comes something else. The same verse, 1 Thessalonians 5:14 tells us not only to comfort the fainthearted and uphold the weak, but also to warn the unruly. The word for warn is to admonish, to confront the person with Scripture and the sinfulness of sin. This is not merely a job for the pastor. Romans 15:14 says that it is for every Christian. *4 Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another (Rom 15:14)* You simply hold a person to the standard of Scripture. You say, you claim to be under the lordship of Christ, what does our Lord require of you? Are you truly His? Are you one of His sheep? Sheep follow the Shepherd. They don't set their own course.

By the way, this is one of the reasons for keeping a clean conscience. Christians who have wounded consciences through persistent sin and lack of confession do not want to admonish or warn others because they have lost their moral boldness. I'll be a hypocrite if I admonish another, they say. Of course, this is the sign of a wounded conscience. Paul felt the weight of his sinfulness, but because of a clean and upright conscience he said “*28 Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. (Col 1:28)* Don't let the deceitfulness of sin make a coward of you. You can admonish others without being perfect.

Now we do this, according to Galatians 6:1 with gentleness, considering ourselves. Our goal is not simply to rebuke, but to rebuke with the goal of restoring.

So what happens if this doesn't bring the person back? Someone is wandering off the path, and you encourage him, and he doesn't come back. You warn and admonish, and he doesn't come back. At that point, Matthew 18 says you involve two or three witnesses. You choose people of proven spiritual maturity and you go again to restore the person. And these witnesses are there to observe whether the person is truly wandering and unrepentant or not. And if they conclude the person is stubbornly disobeying, they join in the admonishing. If the person still does not come back,

Matthew 18 says the whole church is involved. Now the whole assembly becomes part of the rescue effort – calling, speaking, writing and exhorting the person to turn from this path. If the wanderer does not come back after all this admonishment, we go to level three.

Level three is disfellowshipping the defiant. Jesus put it this way: *17 "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. (Mat 18:17)*

In Jewish culture, the heathen Gentile and the tax collector were those outside the nation. They had lost their identification as Israelite. Tax collectors, like Matthew, were considered traitors, and the heathen were considered unclean. So what Jesus is saying is, when someone has defied the authority of Christ do consistently and so flagrantly, there comes a moment when as a church, you must change your relationship with that person. You must corporately agree, this person has wandered, and is not coming back. That is not like a sheep of Christ. We can no longer call this person brother, or sister. We can no longer call him or her a member of our church, whose testimony of salvation we have heard and vouch for. We must now regard this person as an unbeliever to be evangelised. We do not count them as enemies, but we can no longer count them as family. Our fellowship in Christ no longer exists. We will pray for the person, love him or her, be courteous, be kind, continue to exhort and admonish, but we will not celebrate the Lord's Supper with this person. We will not call this person brother or sister. We will not continue the relationship as it used to be – and that includes Facebook.

Now this final step will have one of two effects. If the person is genuinely apostate, then this will confirm it. The person will wander further, but the church will be purified and protected. The second possible effect is that the person is a true Christian, and the shame of exclusion by God's people will be the straw that break the camel's back, and he or she will repent and return.

Now many churches today can't be bothered to do any of the levels, because they have swallowed the live and let live philosophy. Mind your own business, they say, leave people alone and they will find their way. No, Scripture says, people will wander, wanderers will perish, so obedient Christians restore disobedient Christians.

And I think James knew this personally. Because as you might remember, he was one of the half-brothers of Jesus that did not believe in Him. And after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to him personally, bringing him from the dead faith he had, to a living faith in a risen Lord. James had been a wanderer, and he knew that his half-brother had saved him from death and a multitude of sins.

So he wrote this letter to say, don't trust in your own righteousness. Don't trust in your sincerity. I once did that. I was once a wanderer. But now that I have been born from above, I submit to Christ, in my trials, in my temptations, in my reception of the Word, in my reception of other people, in my speech, in my wisdom, in my relationships, in my planning, and judging, and spending, and praying. So James says, don't trust in your own heart – it will wander. Hold yourself, and hold others, and allow others to hold you to the standard of the Word, a living faith that works.

“Oh, my brothers and sisters in Christ, if sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies; and if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay, and not madly to destroy themselves. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for.” - Spurgeon