

Place: Lurgan Baptist 6:2:2005

Reading: James 5:13-20

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

33. SPIRITUAL DRIFTING

Robert Robinson, author of the hymn “*Come Thou fount of every blessing,*” lost the happy fellowship with the Saviour which he once enjoyed. In his declining years he drifted into the bypaths of sin. As a result he became deeply troubled in spirit. Hoping to relieve his mind he decided to travel. In the course of his journeys he became acquainted with a young lady who was a keen Christian. She asked him one day what he thought of a hymn she had just been reading. To his astonishment he found it to be none other than his own composition. He tried to evade her question but she continued to press him for a response. Suddenly he began to weep. With tears streaming down his face he said, “*I am the man who wrote that hymn many years ago. I’d give anything to experience again the joy that I knew then.*” Although greatly surprised, she reassured him that “*the streams of mercy,*” mentioned in his hymn still flowed. Turning his “*wandering heart,*” to the Lord Robert Robinson was restored to full fellowship with the Lord.

You see failure is one of the realities of life, especially the Christian life. Christians fail. They wander from the truth. Demas wandered from it. (2 Tim 4:10) What about Hymenaeus and Philetus ? (2 Tim 2:17) ? There was a time when Bishop Cranmer under the most inhuman pressure wandered from the truth and signed a document to that effect, but later he came back and held out that hand that had signed the document in the flames to burn first. *But how many do we personally know today who have wandered from the truth ?* They once sat with us at the Breaking of Bread, they were baptised in the same pool. But where are they today ? They have wandered from the truth. Some gave out tracts to those who were standing in the queue to enter the dance hall.

Some preached in the open air. When they prayed in the prayer meeting no one wanted to follow them, because they seemed to know the Lord so intimately.

Yet where are they today ? Intellectual pressures, political ambitions, firm young flesh, financial success, a course in a theological seminary, homosexuality, the honours and applause of the world and many other temptations drew them away and today they are spiritually drifting ! *But what happens when we do wander away ? Does God write us off ?* Does the Lord sentence us to a kind of spiritual dry

dock where we spend the rest of our lives rusting away, while we observe others doing what we can no longer do ? Well, its to this theme of failure and restoration that James directs out attention in these two closing verses of his epistle. You see, one of the most outstanding traits of this man that comes through time and again in this letter is his deep, sympathetic, practical understanding and willingness to identify with the needs of the church of Jesus Christ. Do you recall how he begins this letter ?

He writes to “ *the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad greeting. My brethren*,” (1:2) Do you see how he ends this letter ? “ *Brethren*,” And in between the opening and closing verses he uses the word “ *brethren*,” 13 times. When he is teaching them, it is as brethren. When he is scolding them it is as brethren. When he is comforting them it is as brethren. Why ? Because he has a deep genuine concern for the church of Christ ! Do you share that concern ? It is so easy to be critical of “ *the church*,” and to spend a great deal of time sniping and snarling, judging and pontificating about the church in an unhelpful way. Remember this,
“ *Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it.*”
(Eph 5:25)

And our concern should be to encourage the church in a spirit of loving concern. E. Stanley Jones once said, “ *I know that the church has its stupidities and irrelevancies, but I love my mother in spite of her weaknesses and wrinkles.*” We can learn from that ! So James turns to his final theme in this letter showing once again that the church is a fellowship of mutual concern.

I want to talk to you this “ *Spiritual Drifting*,”

(1) A REALITY WE NEED TO FACE

The reality is this. Its possible to drift, to fall, to fail. The O.T. term for this is “ *backsliding*.” (Jer 3:12) Sometimes a Christian is “ *overtaken in a fault*,” (Gal 6:1) but usually the sin is the result of slow, gradual, spiritual decline. James asks us to face this reality by calling our attention to,

(a) *THE PERSON:*

“ *Brethren if any of you*,” (5:20) Who is James addressing ? Believers ! In the Christian fellowship someone is beginning to backslide. James is not talking about a lost man. He is speaking of a true believer, falling, slipping, drifting ! Now of course, this does not mean that a Christian who falls is no longer a Christian. One who has been born into Christ’s family can never sever that relationship. The Lord Jesus likened spiritual birth to physical birth. *It only takes places once.* My if

your natural child disobeys you, does not speak to you for a week, never thanks you for gifts, does that mean the relationship is broken ? Does that mean he is no longer your child ? Of course not ! He has been born into your family and although the fellowship may be damaged, the relationship can never be severed.

My there is a great difference between relationship and fellowship, between union and communion. James is saying that the fellowship within the family of God can be damaged but the good news is that it can be restored. (a)

(b) THE PATH:

“ *Brethren if any of you do err,*” (5:20) The Amplified Bible puts it, “ *If any among you strays.*” The verb “ *err,*” means “ *to wander.*” It suggest a gradual moving away from the will of God. The Lord Jesus uses this same word in (Matt 18:12) when He says, “ *If a man have an hundred sheep and one of them be gone astray.*” How did the sheep wander astray ? It didn’t intend to do that. There was a little patch of grass here, so the sheep kept his head down and followed his appetite. Then it wandered to the next patch of grass, and the next, and before the sheep knew it, it had wandered away. My do you know by experience what I am talking about ? Could it be that this is a picture of you as a believer now ? The word “ *err,*” or “ *strays,*” in Greek (*planao*) Gives us our English word planet. The ancient Greeks watched the skies and saw the planets as wandering among the fixed stars of heaven.

***“ Prone to wander, Lord I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love.”***

Have you wandered away from the Lord ? You see, backsliding rarely begins with a bang, it usually begins quietly, slowly, subtly, insidiously. It is a wandering, a straying, it is a slow drifting with the tide. Is it any wonder that the N.T. teems with warnings about this kind of danger ? At least 15 times in the N.T. we are told to “ *beware,*” about 30 times we are told to “ *take heed,*” about 15 times we are told to “ *watch.*” Why all these commands ? For one simple reason. In the Christian life there is no victory without vigilance. Do you recall what Paul says ? “ *Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.*”

(1 Cor 10:12) You see, there is no person so far advanced along the Christian pathway, so knowledgeable in the Scriptures, so experienced in Christian service, so elevated in church affairs, that he is beyond the reach of Satan, the possibility of falling and the danger of backsliding. James says, “ *Brethren if any of you do err,*”

(5:19) He is asking us to face this reality by calling our attention to (a) (b) and to

(c) THE PLACE:

For from what has this person strayed ? James says, “ *the truth.* ” (5:19) The “ *truth,* ” means of course the Word of God. Do you remember what the Saviour said in His great high priestly prayer ? “ *Sanctify them through Thy truth Thy word is truth.* ” (17:17) Now James has already told us in this letter that “ *the truth,* ” is the means of our salvation (1:18) and the means of our growth. (1:21) You see, “ *the truth,* ” is connected with our becoming a Christian, and it is connected with our being a Christian throughout the remainder of our lives. Here James is saying, “ don’t wander away from the Word of God.” My we must not put our convictions on the shelf. If we do not stay close to the truth, we will wander away from it. Are we not living in a day when people are saying, “ *Doctrine does not matter. We must be tolerant to all and big-hearted enough to let all speak their minds and to hold their own opinions.* ” But doctrine matters greatly. Why ? Because what a man believes will determine how he behaves. Our creed governs our conduct. You see, when a believer deviates from the faith once delivered unto the saints, it won’t be long before that same person, morally, physically, spiritually strays in his ways. Tell me, are you wandering away from the place of sound doctrine ? Or does the Word of God still hold an unrivalled place in your life. (1)

2. A RESPONSIBILITY WE NEED TO SHARE

Look if you will at (5:19) Or “ *And another person brings him back to God.* ” (A.N.T.) Now let me ask you. What is your first reaction when you hear that someone in the faith has fallen ? Do you rush to the telephone and say, “ *Did you hear ?* ” Do you delight in spreading the news ? Or are you burdened enough to want to go and help bring that person back ? Some teenage girls were talking about falling into difficulty. One of them commented, “ *If I got into trouble, those people down there at the church would be the last people on earth I would want to know.* ” What a tragic commentary on the church of Jesus Christ ! The people down at the church should be the first ones to know, if they were spiritual, and in the business of burden-bearing and restoration. My so often in our zeal to win the lost (Prov 11:30) *we sometimes forget we are also to win the saved.* We have a responsibility to bring them back, to save them from death, and to cover a multitude of sins. Now look at this responsibility and notice that it is,

(a) PERSONAL

The word translated, “ *And one or someone convert him,* ” is completely indefinite. In the matter of the healing of someone who was sick, James points out a responsibility belonging to the elders of the church.

(5:14) But here is different. It is not “ *your pastor, or elders, or office-bearers.* ” James says “ *someone.* ” You see, the agent in the recovery of the back-slider is the other believer who sees his fellow-believer in spiritual need. Do you recall what Paul says when speaking of Christian service ? He says that God has “ *given to us the ministry of reconciliation.* ” (2 Cor 5:18) James now says that we have been also given the ministry of restoration. Does this not tie in with Paul’s teaching on the body of Christ ? He says, “ *So we being many are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.* ” (Rom 12:5) He says we should “ *bear one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ.* ”

(Gal 6:2) My do you see this ministry as your responsibility ? When you see a fellow-believer moving away from the Lord, do you realise you are responsible to run to his aid ? I heard the story about a young man who applied for a job as an usher in a music hall. As part of the interview process the manager asked him, “ *What would you do in case a fire breaks out ?* ” The young man responded, “ *Oh, don’t worry about me I can get out fine.* ” Is that not how many of us react to straying saints ? Are you so absorbed in saving your own skin ?

Or perhaps you don’t see this as your responsibility. Yet James says, “ *And one convert him.* ” This responsibility is personal.

(b) IS CONDITIONAL:

You see there are qualifications for this ministry of restoration. Paul says, “ *Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault ye which are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself lest thou also be tempted.* ” (Gal 6:1) James is saying that if a man is wandering away from the truth, the man to bring him back is the man who is himself walling in the truth. If a man is a long way from the Lord, the person to bring him back is a person who is walking closely with the Lord. Do you qualify now for this ministry ? Are you yourself walking closely with the Lord ? (a) (b)

(c) IS PARADOXICAL:

Its perplexing. Why ? Well, look at that word

“ *convert.* ” When we think of conversion we normally think of the moment when a person becomes a Christian.

(Acts 3:19) But the word “ *convert,* ” has another sense. It comes from two Greek

words that would literally be translated “ *to turn back.* ” Does this not fit in with the person who has wandered away ? Do Christians need to be converted ? Yes ! The Lord Jesus said to Peter, “ *when thou art converted (when you have turned again) strengthen thy brethren.* ” (Lk 22:32) Now here is the paradox. My we cannot actually convert anyone. We certainly cannot convert someone in the sense of making them a Christian, nor can we restore anyone to the joy of God’s salvation. Its beyond our power. How can we explain this then ?

Well, do you remember Onesimus ? He was the runaway slave. He ran away from home, came to Rome, got into contact with Paul and through Paul’s influence he came to Christ. Do you know how Paul speaks of this ? He says of Onesimus, “ *whom I have begotten in my bonds.* ” (Philemon 10) He says, “ *I have given Onesimus spiritual birth.* ” Now why does he use that language ? To show the Christians involvement in the ministry of evangelism. Why does James uses this language ? To show the believers involvement in the ministry of restoration. My our involvement is to be so total, that James is able to say that we are to convert the backslider. (2) Is there some Christian you know who has wandered ? Do you feel any concern for them ? Do you feel any responsibility to turn them back again ? There is (1) (2) and there is,

(3) A RECOVERY WE NEED TO KNOW

We need to know that a straying believer can,

(a) *BE RESCUED:*

You see, if we engage in this ministry of restoration we will save a soul from death. Now the Greek word translated “ *death,* ” (thanatos) could be translated “ *punishment,* ” but eternal death is not the issue here. I think James is referring to physical death. John speaks about the same thing in his epistle when he says, “ *there is a sin unto death.* ” (1Jn 5:16) There is a sin that leads to death. You see, when a Christian becomes rebellious and unrepentant, sometimes God takes him out prematurely through physical death. Do you recall what happened to Ananias and Sapphira ? They were guilty of pretence and deception and God said, “ *Come on home if you are going to act that way.* ” (Acts 5:1) This is what happened to the Corinthian believers who were abusing the Lord’s Supper. Suddenly they were becoming ill and dying for no apparent reason. (1 Cor 11:3) Do you realise that it’s a dangerous thing when you wander from the Lord ? God could take you out or God could bring you back through a caring

Christian. (a)

(b) BE RESTORED:

“ *Let him of sins.* ” (5:20) Myif we are going to help that erring believer we must have an attitude of love, for “ *love shall cover the multitude of sins.* ” (1 Pet 4:8) Now James and Peter learned this principle from the book of Proverbs which states, “ *hate stirreth, but love covereth all sins.* ” (10:12) Now does that mean that love sweeps the dirt under the carpet ? No ! For where there is love there must also be truth (Eph 4:15) And where there is truth there is honest confession of sin and cleansing from God. My love not only helps the offender to face his sins and deal with them but love assures the offender that those sins once forgiven, are remembered no more. Do you recall David’s prayer ? “ *Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation.* ” (Ps 51:12) David not ask for his salvation to be restored for he had never lost it. But he had lost the joy, the thrill, the throb of obedient fellowship. Is that where you are this ?

Have you lost the joy of God’s salvation ? Are you drifting spiritually ? Does the Word of God no longer flash with new meaning ? Has prayer become mechanical ? My the Bible says, “ *If we confess our sins* ” (1 Jn 1:9)

So we come to the end of this epistle. And the end of our series, “ ***Practical Christianity.*** ” How intensely practical it has all been, and what a practical note on which to end. The story is told of young man who strayed from the Lord but was finally brought back by the help of a friend who really loved him. When asked how it felt while he was away from the Lord he said that it seemed like he was out at sea, in deep water, in deep trouble and all his friends were on the shoreline hurling biblical accusations at him about justice, penalty and wrong.

“ *But there was one Christian brother who actually swam out to get me and would not let me go. I fought him, but he pushed aside my fighting, grasped me, put a life jacket around me and took me to shore. By the grace of God he was the reason I was restored. He would not let me go.* ”

Do you know a straying believer who needs to be restored ? Do you know a seeking sinner who needs to be saved ? Oh may we say with Charles Wesley

*“ Enlarge, inflame and fill my heart
With boundless charity divine
So shall I all my strength exert
And love with them a zeal like thine
And lead them to thy open side
The sheep for whom their Shepherd died.”*