



The Letter of James  
**Bible Study Session 18**  
**James 5:19-20**  
**“Reclaiming the Straying”**

Study By  
*Lorin L Cranford*

**Greek NT**

19 Ἀδελφοί μου, εἰάν τις ἐν ὑμῖν πλανηθῆ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ ἐπιστρέψῃ τις αὐτόν, 20 γινωσκέτω ὅτι ὁ ἐπιστρέψας ἁμαρτωλὸν ἐκ πλάνης ὁδοῦ αὐτοῦ σώσει ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐκ θανάτου καὶ καλύψει πλῆθος ἁμαρτιῶν.

**Gute Nachricht Bibel**

19 Meine Brüder und Schwestern, wenn jemand unter euch vom rechten Weg abirrt und ein anderer bringt ihn zur Umkehr, 20 dann soll der wissen: Wer einen Menschen, der sündigt, von seinem Irrweg abbringt, rettet ihn vor dem Tod und macht viele eigene Sünden gut.

**NRSV**

19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20 you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

**NLT**

19 My dear brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders away from the truth and is brought back again, 20 you can be sure that the one who brings that person back will save that sinner from death and bring

**The Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>**

How do you want to be remembered? For those of us nearing the end of our journey on planet earth, this question looms larger and larger. In conversations with others, do you try to anticipate your last words to the other person? Those last words create the final -- and sometimes the most lasting -- impression of who we are and what we stand for.

These final words that James leaves for his readers are substantial. Essentially he plants in our minds a call for the believing community to care for its members who have strayed from obedience to Christ. In 5:19-20 we are given a powerful charge to engage in some of the most difficult work in church life. All through his writing, James has repeatedly 'drawn a line in the sand' demanding serious commitment to Christ and to others. He expresses little patience for a mediocre and superficial Christianity. His commitment to Christ is the passion of his life, and he expects the same of every believer. Although this could come across as stern and uncaring, he has interspersed his writing with the pastoral Ἀδελφοί μου, *my brothers*. He closes out his writing to the Christian readers of the mid first century with a compassionate appeal for them to not forget about those in their spiritual family who have wandered into some kind of disobedience to Christ.

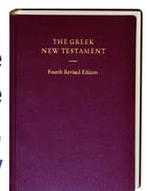
And so he leaves us with this appeal as we finish reading the book.

**1. What did the text mean to the first readers?**

**Background:**

**Historical Setting.**

**External History.** These two short verses produce two places in verse twenty where the editors of The Greek New Testament (4th rev. ed) consider the variations in wording found in the now available manuscripts of this passage can impact the translation of the text. First, in verse 20, variation in the spelling of the verb γινωσκέτω ὅτι surfaces.<sup>2</sup> The adopted text reads, *let him know*



<sup>1</sup>With each study we will ask two basic questions. First, what was the most likely meaning that the first readers of this text understood? This is called the 'historical meaning' of the text. That must be determined, because it becomes the foundation for the second question, "What does the text mean to us today?" For any applicational meaning of the text for modern life to be valid it must grow out of the historical meaning of the text. Otherwise, the perceived meaning becomes false and easily leads to wrong belief.

<sup>2</sup>20 {B} γινωσκέτω ὅτι κ A 81 322 323 436 945 1067 1175 1241 1243 1292 1409 1611 1735 1739 1846 1852 2298 2344 2464 Byz [K L P] Lect ita<sup>r, l, s, t</sup> vg syr<sup>p</sup> cop<sup>bo</sup> arm eth (geo) slav Didymus<sup>dub</sup> // γινώσκετε ὅτι B 1505 2138 syr<sup>h</sup> // ὅτι Ψ Origen<sup>lat</sup> // omit P<sup>74</sup> it<sup>ff</sup> cop<sup>sa</sup>

[Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini et al., *The Greek New Testament*, Fourth Revised Edition (With Apparatus); *The Greek New Testament*, 4th Revised Edition (With Apparatus) (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; Stuttgart, 2000).]

that.... The primary alternative reading is γινώσκετε ὅτι, *you know that....* This could also be taken as an imperative verb since the spelling is the same: *know that....*<sup>3</sup> The weight of external evidence favors the third person singular reading, but the internal evidence is split between these two possibilities. With either reading the essential meaning is the same. The difference is between the awareness of the importance of this reclaiming ministry centering on the congregation or on the individual member engaging in reclaiming the wayward.

The second variation in wording surfaces in the phrase σώσει ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐκ θανάτου, *he will deliver his soul from death.*<sup>4</sup> The variations concentrate on the possessive αὐτοῦ, *his.*<sup>5</sup> The copyists were struggling with understanding whose life is being delivered, that of the wayward, or that of the reclaimer.<sup>6</sup> The adopted text reading σώσει ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐκ θανάτου leaves the issue vague: the reclaimer, ὁ ἐπιστρέψας, delivers either his life, ψυχὴν, or that of the ἁμαρτωλὸν, *sinner*, from death. The phraseology favors the life of the sinner being delivered from death, but is not absolutely clear. The first alternative shifts the possessive to ἐκ θανάτου αὐτοῦ, so that the reading becomes *he saves a soul from death itself.* Others are very puzzled by αὐτοῦ and thus omit it completely. Translators face the dilemma of whether to leave the expression ambiguous or to reflect an interpretive understanding. Thus translations will be divided on how to handle the expression. The manuscript evidence favors the adopted reading which leaves the expression favoring the idea of the sinner's life being delivered but is not absolutely clear. The perceived ambiguity is actually derived more from later Roman Catholic teaching that the priest in hearing confessions secures his soul before God.

Of course, as we have consistently noticed, these two variations are not the only places where differences in wording surface across the spectrum of all of the existing ancient copies of this passage. The *Novum Testamentum Graece* text apparatus lists a total seven places of text variations for these two verses.<sup>7</sup> Once more, as has consistently been the case, these later variations uniformly



<sup>3</sup>“The third person imperative γινώσκέτω may have been changed to the second person plural imperative γινώσκετε in order to make the verb agree in number with the plural address ἀδελφοί μου (my brothers and sisters) in v. 19. Or γινώσκέτω may have been changed to γινώσκετε in order to avoid the ambiguity of whether the subject of the verb is the person who converts someone or the person who is converted. Some translations read ‘you should know’ or ‘you may be sure’ (so NRSV and REB), and others read ‘he should know’ or ‘he may be sure’ (NAB, NJB).” [Roger L. Omanson and Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament: An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger’s Textual Commentary for the Needs of Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 479.]

<sup>4</sup>20 {C} αὐτοῦ ἐκ θανάτου κ A P 048<sup>vid</sup> 33 436 1067 1409 1735 1739 2298 2344 2464 it<sup>ar, s, t</sup> vg syr<sup>p, h</sup> cop<sup>bo</sup> arm (eth) Didymus<sup>dub</sup> Cyril // ἐκ θανάτου αὐτοῦ P<sup>74</sup> B 1292 1611 2138 it<sup>ff</sup> // ἐκ θανάτου Ψ 81 322 323 945 1175 1241 1243 1505 1846 1852 Byz [K L] Lect cop<sup>sa</sup> Origen<sup>lat</sup> John-Damascus // αὐτοῦ Ambrosiaster

[Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini et al., *The Greek New Testament*, Fourth Revised Edition (With Apparatus); *The Greek New Testament*, 4th Revised Edition (With Apparatus) (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; Stuttgart, 2000).]

<sup>5</sup>“The reading that seems best able to account for the origin of the other readings is ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐκ θανάτου (his soul from death), which is well supported by important manuscripts. Copyists were perplexed, not knowing whether ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ (his soul) referred to the soul of the person converted or to the soul of the person who converted someone else. In order to remove this ambiguity, some copyists moved the pronoun αὐτοῦ to follow ἐκ θανάτου (“from death itself”) and others omitted the pronoun entirely.

“Many translations maintain the ambiguity of the Greek text. Others, such as NRSV, reflect a clear exegetical choice in the translation: ‘whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death’ (similarly TEV). Since the author probably did not intend his statement to be ambiguous, it may be best to place one interpretation in the text and the other in a footnote. TEV, for example, places the following alternate rendering in a footnote: ‘or his own soul.’”

[Roger L. Omanson and Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament: An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger’s Textual Commentary for the Needs of Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 479-80.]

<sup>6</sup>To most of us, especially in Protestantism, this seems to be a strange alternative. But the issue evidently wasn’t that clearly defined in ancient Judaism. Texts such as Sirach 28:2 suggest some variation of thinking prior to James in Jewish circles: “Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.”

#### <sup>7</sup>Jakobus 5,19

\* 049 m vg<sup>ms</sup> (μου is omitted after Ἀδελφοί in a few mss)

| txt P<sup>74</sup> κ A B K P Ψ 048. 049. 81. 614. 630. 1241. 1505. 1739 al lat sy

\* επιστρεψατε Ψ (syh) (ἐπιστρέψατε replaces ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ ἐπιστρέψῃ τις: “if one wanders, you return him”)

\* οδοῦ P<sup>74</sup> (ἀληθείας is replaced by either ὁδοῦ or ὁδοῦ τῆς ἀληθείας)

| οδοῦ τῆς ἀληθείας κ 33. 81. 623. 1846. 2464 al sy<sup>p</sup> bo<sup>ms</sup>

| txt A B P 048<sup>vid</sup>. 049. 1739 M latt sy<sup>h</sup> co (Ψ cf)

#### Jakobus 5,20

\*† γινώσκετε ὅτι B 69. 1505 pc sy<sup>h</sup> (γινώσκέτω ὅτι is replaced by one of these alternatives; see above discussion)

represent later stylistic efforts to update the language of the text and to make the ideas clearer. None of the variations changes the essential meaning of the passage.

Consequently we can analyze the adopted reading of this passage in the full confidence that it expresses the original wording of what was originally written in the mid first century.

**Internal History.** One social background issue present here is how members of various social and religious groups in the ancient world were viewed by the group when these members deviated from the established rules of the organization they belonged to. Sociologically this is labeled conformity / deviation norms.<sup>8</sup> Just as such plays an important role in today's society when churches seek to either discipline wayward members or attempt to bring them back in line, the general attitudes toward such play a shaping role on the thinking of the religious community. If the surrounding attitudes strongly favor tolerance and leniency toward errant members, most churches won't differ too much from that in their treatment of erring members.

Additionally what James touches on here has connections conceptually to both church discipline and the contention of heresy. How do these three dynamics relate to one another? That is, when should the church 'reclaim,' 'discipline,' and banish as heretics? Related but treated in the exegesis below, what is the 'wandering from the Truth'? Is it doctrinal error? Or, moral failure? Or, some of both? Such needs some background exploration as a backdrop to understanding 5:19-20 more clearly.

In the Greco-Roman religious world, conformity vs. non-conformity would hardly have been an issue, since Romans approached religion from a polytheistic view and religious conformity centered in sufficiently frequent offering of sacrifices at the various shrines and temples. What we would label as theology, that is, defined religious belief and any expected conformity to it, was non-existent in Roman life. Romans easily adopted religious viewpoints from other cultures, especially from the Greeks, into their understanding. This was tacked onto the core *mos maiorum* religious traditions that reached back to the understood beginning of Roman society.<sup>9</sup> Consequently the spotty persecution of Christianity, as well as other religious movements in the first century world, were based strictly on whether the new religious group accepted the legitimacy of existing religions, especially the traditional Roman religions, and whether or not they supported the emperor. If they passed the test of loyalty to the state of Rome, they enjoyed legal status as *religio licita*. If not, they were banned as *religio illicita* and being a member of such a group was an act of treason against the government of Rome.<sup>10</sup> The content of what was believed was of no interest to the Romans whatsoever. Thus the concept

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| σι Ψ

| – P74 ff sa

| txt x A P 1739 M lat syp bopt

\* την A 049. 1243 al (the article τὴν is added before ψυχὴν)

\* 2 3 1 P74 B 614 pc ff (the sequencing of αὐτοῦ ἐκ θανάτου is shifted by some manuscripts)

| 2 3 Ψ m sa; Or<sup>lat</sup>

| txt x A P 048<sup>vid</sup>. 33. 1739 al vg sy; Cyr

\* αμην 614. 1505. 1852 pc t vg<sup>mss</sup> syh (ἀμὴν is added at the very end after ἀμαρτιῶν)

[Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1993), 597.]

<sup>8</sup>For an introductory presentation of the sociological approaches, see Muzafer Sherif, "Conformity-deviation, norms, and group relations," *Conformity and Deviation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 159-198. The modern world of the social sciences is conducting substantial research and study into patterns of conformity and non-conformity with defined social groups such as family, religious organization, corporate employment etc. Prof. Sherif at the University of Oklahoma is one of the early pioneers of such studies beginning in the late 1930s. Unfortunately most of this work centers on the modern world with only a tiny portion exploring past history, and usually then no further back than the middle ages.

A few researchers have explored in a modern setting the impact of individualism and collectivism on this theme of conformity vs. non-conformity: Berry, J. W. (1967). "Independence and conformity in subsistence-level societies". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 7: 415-418; Bond, M. H.; & Smith, P. B. (1996). "Culture and Conformity: A meta-analysis of studies using the Asch's (1952b, 1956) line judgement task". *Psychological Bulletin* 119: 111-137. Not surprisingly greater levels of conformity typically surface in a collectivistic oriented society and higher levels of nonconformity in the individualistic societies.

To my knowledge, the exploration of this in the first century Greco-Roman world has not been attempted. Or, if so is in a very early stage of study.

<sup>9</sup>For a helpful survey see "Religion in ancient Rome," wikipedia.org.

<sup>10</sup>This is why charges against Paul during his missionary service brought by Jewish synagogues leaders and others had to appeal to violations of Roman law, if they were to gain credibility. See Acts 16:20-21 for an example where this worked at Philippi,

of τις ἐν ὑμῖν πλανηθῆ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας, [one among you is led from the Truth](#), is not a way of thinking with any connection to non-Christian religious life in the first century. Its background was exclusively in Christianity's Jewish heritage.

The closest one would find the thought of wandering away from truth would have been in the philosophical circles where rejection of the teachings of one of the philosophers was judged to reflect ignorance on the part of such a person. But even this would have to be understood in the context of a 'confrontational pedagogy' where students were expected to challenge the ideas of their philosopher teacher. Ignorance was rejection of their teacher without adequate reason or foundation for an alternative view.

The pressure to conform to some set of standards seems to have come more from the patronage system that served as the economic backbone of the Roman economy. Here the leverage of the Roman patron over his *clientela* was the main determiner of conformity. Interestingly the term *pietas* as dutiful devotion to one's *patronus* emerges initially as a non religious term.<sup>11</sup> Whatever he demanded in order to grant loans and other favors produced conformity to his required norms. The complex layers of social status based networks functioning in that world played a vital role in extracting conformity to norms.<sup>12</sup> Non-conformity could have substantial economic and social status consequences.

Thus non-participation or even diminished participation in a Christian community represented non-conformity but with different motivations and parameters than generally experienced in first century society. The clearest signal of this comes in Heb. 10:25.<sup>13</sup> Also the emergence of alternative Christian viewpoints focused on the basics of the Gospel rather than peripherals began to show up by the 50s of the first century and became a growing issue as is clearly evidenced in the pastoral epistles, along with Jude and Second Peter by the mid 60s. These writings which address deviate teachings about the Gospel do not give a clear signal on whether a formal type of break from the 'main stream' groups occurred or not. One would need to remember the house church nature of Christian gatherings in any city across the Roman empire in the first century. Most likely, these deviate teachers simply managed to gain control over select house church groups scattered around a city, with the goal of eventually controlling all of them. Whether the infected house church continued associating with the larger community of believers was one indication of heresy by disassociating from the other Christian house churches in the city. Some thirty-five to forty years later, First John 2:19 clearly indicates that breaking off relationships with other house churches in the city was taking place when deviate teachings took over control.<sup>14</sup> Probably, but not certainly, this was the pattern in the 60s as well.

For a small house church group to break away represented a significant action with greater implications in a highly conformist oriented society as was the case in the first century Roman world. For the larger Christian community to take disciplinary action either against an individual member (cf. Titus 3:9-11) or group of members (2 Pet. 2:1-3) took on a tone of stigmatizing with sharper tones than generally would be true in the modern world. Part of this grows out of the collectivistic orientation of ancient society. This lay at the base of group identity as the determiner of one's sense of individual worth and identity. Exclusion from the group had serious repercussions.

Thus James' emphasis on reclaiming wayward members of the group takes on special significance in the setting of the ancient world. Showing compassion toward non-conformists was not a known trait of Greco-Roman society. But inside the community of believers it was important.

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but Acts 18:12-17 where failure to come at this way not failed with Gallio but led to disaster for the synagogue leaders.

<sup>11</sup>Karl-J. Hölkamp, *Reconstructing the Roman Republic: An Ancient Political Culture and Modern Research* (Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 33–35; Emilio Gabba, *Republican Rome: The Army and the Allies*, translated by P.J. Cuff (University of California Press, 1976), p. 26.

<sup>12</sup>For a helpful discussion of social class, see "Social class in ancient Rome," wikipedia.org.

<sup>13</sup>**Heb. 10:24-25.** 24 And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, 25 [not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some](#), but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

24 καὶ κατανοῶμεν ἀλλήλους εἰς παροξυσμὸν ἀγάπης καὶ καλῶν ἔργων, 25 [μὴ ἐγκαταλείποντες τὴν ἐπισυναγωγὴν ἑαυτῶν, καθὼς ἔθος τισίν](#), ἀλλὰ παρακαλοῦντες, καὶ τοσοῦτῳ μᾶλλον ὅσω βλέπετε ἐγγίζουσιν τὴν ἡμέραν.

<sup>14</sup>**First John 2:19.** They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us.

ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐξῆλθαν ἀλλ' οὐκ ἦσαν ἐξ ἡμῶν· εἰ γὰρ ἐξ ἡμῶν ἦσαν, μεμενῆκεισαν ἂν μεθ' ἡμῶν· ἀλλ' ἵνα φανερωθῶσιν ὅτι οὐκ εἰσὶν πάντες ἐξ ἡμῶν.

### Literary:

**Genre:** This single sentence, grammatically, is a third class conditional sentence with the protasis (v. 19, the if-clause) and the apodosis (v. 20) as an admonition. But this is its grammar structure. The admonition nature of the main clause turns the sentence into an encouragement of his readers to engage in this reclaiming activity in the life of the church. The expression clearly continues the general paraenesis focus right to the end of the document. This strategy seems to also be that of the Johannine writer in 1 John 5:21, with a somewhat similar way of ending this document: Τεκνία, φυλάξατε ἑαυτὰ ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων, [Little children, keep yourselves from idols](#).

**Context:** Clearly this sentence in vv. 19-20 serves as the ending of the document of James. No textual variations surface in any manuscript suggesting the letter lost a section during the process of copying over the centuries. To the contrary, some very late Greek manuscripts, along with some Latin and Syriac translations add ἀμήν signaling a formal ending to the document (614. 1505. 1852 pc t vg<sup>mss</sup> sy<sup>h</sup>).

The vocative Ἀδελφοί μου, [my brothers](#), signals this to be a separate segment from vv. 13-18. Conceptually the emphasis on reclaiming a wayward member of the community has slight connections to the concern for the spiritual health of the community in vv. 16-18, but is again distinct from it. The contextual signal of this coming at the very end conveys the idea that this ministry was the last idea James wanted to leave in the minds of his readers. It draws the picture of a social / religious community in the Greco-Roman world going against the social stream of stigmatizing non-conformists and then excluding them from the group. The love of God through Christ has this very impact of pushing Christians to move against the dominant streams of the world around them.

### STRUCTURAL OUTLINE OF TEXT

Of James<sup>15</sup>

<b>PRAESCRPTIO</b>		1.1
<b>BODY</b> 1-194	1.2-5.20	
Facing Trials	1-15	1.2-12
God and Temptation	16-24	1.13-18
The Word and Piety	25-37	1.19-27
Faith and Partiality	38-55	2.1-13
Faith and Works	56-72	2.14-26
Controlling the Tongue	73-93	3.1-12
True and False Wisdom	94-102	3.13-18
Solving Divisions	103-133	4.1-10
Criticism	134-140	4.11-12
Leaving God Out	141-146	4.13-17
Danger in Wealth	147-161	5.1-6
Persevering under Trial	162-171	5.7-11
Swearing	172-174	5.12
Reaching Out to God	175-193	5.13-18
<b>Reclaiming the Wayward</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>5.19-20</b>

### Structure:

The block diagram of the scripture text below in English represents a very literalistic English ex-

<sup>15</sup>Taken from Lorin L. Cranford, A Study Manual of James: Greek Text (Fort Worth: Scripta Publications, Inc., 1988), 285. **Statements** indicate core thought expressions in the text as a basis for schematizing the rhetorical structure of the text. These are found in the Study Manual and also at the James Study internet site.

pression of the original language Greek text in order to preserve as far a possible the grammar structure of the Greek expression, rather than the grammar of the English translation which will always differ from the Greek at certain points.

5.19 My brothers,  
if any of you is led astray  
from the Truth  
and  
someone turns him back,

194 <sup>5.20</sup> **let him know**

that the one turning the sinner back...will save his soul from death,  
from the error of his way  
and  
--- --- ----- --- ----- ---- will cover a multitude of sins.

The rhetorical structure of this passage is very simple, since it is composed of a single sentence. The core expression of this 'third class conditional sentence' in the Greek text is the admonition 'let him know.' The reader is admonished to realize something. The content of what is to be realized is defined in the direct object 'that-clause' and covers two things -- saving and covering. The situation prerequisite for the admonition is defined by the 'if-clause' which describes a Christian brother having gone astray and another Christian brother having led the wayward brother back to the Truth.

Although the rhetorical structure of the sentence is very simple, the declaration nonetheless set forth one of the more controversial views found in all of the New Testament. Roman Catholics and Protestants have fought over this sentence for centuries. Protestants have exhibited sharp disagreements over the precise meaning of the sentence.

### ***Exegesis of the Text.***

In treating a single sentence with a primary (v. 20) and a secondary (v. 19) element, the nature division for exegeting the text is clear. James first pictures a twofold possible situation of a sinning believer being led back to repentance by another member of the community. Then he encourages the brother doing the reclaiming with assurances of divine blessing.

Elsewhere in the New Testament one can find similar emphases. This is particularly true in the writings of Paul. With greater details is **Galatians 6:1-2**,

6 Ἀδελφοί, ἐὰν καὶ προλημφθῆ ἄνθρωπος ἐν τινὶ παραπτώματι, ὑμεῖς οἱ πνευματικοὶ καταρτίζετε τὸν τοιοῦτον ἐν πνεύματι πραΰτητος, σκοπῶν σεαυτὸν μὴ καὶ σὺ πειρασθῆς. 2 Ἀλλήλων τὰ βάρη βαστάζετε καὶ οὕτως ἀναπληρώσετε τὸν νόμον τοῦ Χριστοῦ.

6 My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

But also one finds this concern in other places.

1 **Thess. 5:14.** Παρακαλοῦμεν δὲ ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, νουθετεῖτε τοὺς ἀτάκτους, παραμυθεῖσθε τοὺς ὀλιγοψύχους, ἀντέχεσθε τῶν ἀσθενῶν, μακροθυμεῖτε πρὸς πάντας.

And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.

2 **Thess. 3:14-15.** 14 Εἰ δὲ τις οὐχ ὑπακούει τῷ λόγῳ ἡμῶν διὰ τῆς ἐπιστολῆς, τοῦτον σημειοῦσθε μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι αὐτῷ, ἵνα ἐντραπήῃ· 15 καὶ μὴ ὡς ἐχθρὸν ἠγεῖσθε, ἀλλὰ νουθετεῖτε ὡς ἀδελφόν.

14 Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. 15 Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.

2 **Tim. 2:24-26.** 24 δοῦλον δὲ κυρίου οὐ δεῖ μάχεσθαι ἀλλὰ ἡπιον εἶναι πρὸς πάντας, διδακτικόν, ἀνεξίκακον, 25 ἐν πραΰτητι παιδεύοντα τοὺς ἀντιδιαθεμένους, μήποτε δώρῃ αὐτοῖς ὁ θεὸς μετάνοιαν εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν ἀληθείας 26 καὶ ἀνανήψωσιν ἐκ τῆς τοῦ διαβόλου παγίδος, ἐζωγρημένοι ὑπ' αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸ ἐκείνου θέλημα.

24 And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, 25 correcting opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, 26 and that they may escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.

Outside of Paul's writings the same theme surfaces.

**1 John 5:16-17.** 16 Ἐάν τις ἴδῃ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἁμαρτάνοντα ἁμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον, αἰτήσῃ καὶ δώσει αὐτῷ ζωὴν, τοῖς ἁμαρτάνουσιν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον. ἔστιν ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον· οὐ περὶ ἐκείνης λέγω ἵνα ἐρωτήσῃ. 17 πᾶσα ἀδικία ἁμαρτία ἐστίν, καὶ ἔστιν ἁμαρτία οὐ πρὸς θάνατον.

16 If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one — to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal.

**Jude 22-23.** 22 Καὶ οὖς μὲν ἐλεᾶτε διακρινομένους, 23 οὖς δὲ σώζετε ἐκ πυρὸς ἀρπάζοντες, οὖς δὲ ἐλεᾶτε ἐν φόβῳ μισοῦντες καὶ τὸν ἀπὸ τῆς σαρκὸς ἐσπιλωμένον χιτῶνα.

22 And have mercy on some who are wavering; 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.

Once the larger picture of the New Testament is pulled together it becomes easier to see that early Christianity felt a strong need for pulling back into the community members who for one reason or another had disconnected themselves from the community. Across the spectrum of NT writers reaching out to such people was considered very important.

But one should not forget another dynamic equally emphasized that is closely connected to this theme. Early Christianity strictly practiced church discipline among its members. The anchor point for this comes in the teaching of Jesus in **Matt. 18:15-18**.

15 Ἐάν δὲ ἁμαρτήσῃ [εἰς σε] ὁ ἀδελφός σου, ὕπαγε ἐλεγξον αὐτὸν μετὰ σοῦ καὶ αὐτοῦ μόνου. ἐάν σου ἀκούσῃ, ἐκέρδῃσας τὸν ἀδελφόν σου· 16 ἐάν δὲ μὴ ἀκούσῃ, παράλαβε μετὰ σοῦ ἑτὶ ἓνα ἢ δύο, ἵνα ἐπὶ στόματος δύο μαρτύρων ἢ τριῶν σταθῇ πᾶν ῥῆμα· 17 ἐάν δὲ παρακούσῃ αὐτῶν, εἰπέ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ· ἐάν δὲ καὶ τῆς ἐκκλησίας παρακούσῃ, ἔστω σοι ὡσπερ ὁ ἐθνικός καὶ ὁ τελώνης. 18 Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν· ὅσα ἐάν δήσητε ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται δεδεμένα ἐν οὐρανῷ, καὶ ὅσα ἐάν λύσητε ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται λελυμένα ἐν οὐρανῷ.

15 If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Here the issue originates as an issue between two members of the believing community. The solution begins with a one on one effort to resolve the problem -- whatever it may be -- without the community getting involved. But if this proves impossible, then the community of believers is the next stage of attempted solution, with Jesus expressing the assumption that the pressure of the group on the individual will be stronger than just the offended member. If no solution emerges from the church's involvement, then the entire community is to treat the offending member "as a Gentile and a tax collector," ἔστω σοι ὡσπερ ὁ ἐθνικός καὶ ὁ τελώνης. In this Palestinian Jewish setting, this signaled treating the person as an outsider who did not belong to the group. This is not a formal excommunication of the member, but a shunning of contact with him. The language of verse 18 strongly suggests this must be carried out within the framework of God's will, and is thus to be an expression of God's displeasure with the offending individual.

In **First Corinthians 5:1-8** is the most detailed description of this practice in the New Testament:

5 Ὅλως ἀκούεται ἐν ὑμῖν πορνεία, καὶ τοιαύτη πορνεία ἣτις οὐδὲ ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, ὥστε γυναῖκά τινα τοῦ πατρὸς ἔχειν. 2 καὶ ὑμεῖς πεφουσιωμένοι ἐστέ καὶ οὐχὶ μᾶλλον ἐπενθήσατε, ἵνα ἀρθῇ ἐκ μέσου ὑμῶν ὁ τὸ ἔργον τοῦτο πράξας; 3 ἐγὼ μὲν γάρ, ἀπὼν τῷ σώματι παρὼν δὲ τῷ πνεύματι, ἤδη κέκρικα ὡς παρὼν τὸν οὕτως τοῦτο κατεργασάμενον· 4 ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου [ἡμῶν] Ἰησοῦ συναχθέντων ὑμῶν καὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ πνεύματος σὺν τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ, 5 παραδοῦναι τὸν τοιοῦτον τῷ σατανᾷ εἰς ὄλεθρον τῆς σαρκός, ἵνα τὸ πνεῦμα σωθῇ ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τοῦ κυρίου. 6 Οὐ καλὸν τὸ καύχημα ὑμῶν. οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι μικρὰ ζύμη ὅλον τὸ φύραμα ζυμοῖ; 7 ἐκκαθάρατε τὴν παλαιὰν ζύμην, ἵνα ᾗτε νέον φύραμα, καθὼς ἐστε ἄζυμοι· καὶ γὰρ τὸ πάσχα ἡμῶν ἐτύθη Χριστός. 8 ὥστε ἐορτάζωμεν μὴ ἐν ζύμῃ παλαιᾷ μηδὲ ἐν ζύμῃ κακίας καὶ πονηρίας ἀλλ' ἐν ἀζύμοις εὐκρινείας καὶ ἀληθείας.

5 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. 2 And you are arrogant! Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you?

3 For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgment 4 in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

6 Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?  
7 Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. 8 Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

The situation described here is about a gross act of immorality, that of incest, taking place inside the believing community at Corinth. This immoral action is compounded by a very twisted teaching suggesting it was a superior form of spirituality that the church could boast about. Paul is adamant that the community must come together in meeting and take formal action to remove the individual from the community. Paul's language in v. 5 of handing the man over to Satan for punishment reflects the infliction of divine punishment upon the individual, somewhat in the pattern of Job in the Old Testament. The rationale behind this action is expressed in vv. 6-8: his continued presence in the community of believers will have both a corrupting impact but also their becoming 'leavened' by his presence, the old yeast, means the community is no longer acceptable to God. And it is risking divine punishment of the entire community.

In **vv. 9-13**, Paul continues with a broader principle of discipline defining more precisely those who should be disciplined:

9 Ἐγγραψα ὑμῖν ἐν τῇ ἐπιστολῇ μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι πόρνοις, 10 οὐ πάντως τοῖς πόρνοις τοῦ κόσμου τούτου ἢ τοῖς πλεονέκταις καὶ ἄρπαξιν ἢ εἰδωλολάτραις, ἐπεὶ ὠφείλετε ἄρα ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξελεθεῖν. 11 νῦν δὲ ἔγγραψα ὑμῖν μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι ἐάν τις ἀδελφὸς ὀνομαζόμενος ἢ πόρνος ἢ πλεονέκτης ἢ εἰδωλολάτρης ἢ λοῖδορος ἢ μέθυσος ἢ ἄρπαξ, τῷ τοιοῦτῳ μηδὲ συνεσθίειν. 12 τί γάρ μοι τοὺς ἔξω κρίνειν; οὐχὶ τοὺς ἔσω ὑμεῖς κρίνετε; 13 τοὺς δὲ ἔξω ὁ θεὸς κρίνει. ἔξάρατε τὸν πονηρὸν ἐξ ὑμῶν αὐτῶν.

9 I wrote to you in my letter<sup>16</sup> not to associate with sexually immoral persons— 10 not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world. 11 But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one. 12 For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it not those who are inside that you are to judge? 13 God will judge those outside. "Drive out the wicked person from among you."

The church is to shun contact with members who are living in immorality, in order to avoid being tainted by their corruption, as well as having its reputation stained by their immorality. The emphasis in 2 Thess. 3:14-15 suggests one important objective for disciplinary action: to deliver in clear terms a warning of the danger of their behavior to themselves in the hope of seeing repentance and reclaiming of them back in the community of believers.

Another issue of discipline comes in **Titus 3:10-11**.

10 αἰρετικὸν ἄνθρωπον μετὰ μίαν καὶ δευτέραν νουθεσίαν παραιτοῦ, 11 εἰδῶς ὅτι ἐξέστραπται ὁ τοιοῦτος καὶ ἀμαρτάνει ὡν αὐτοκατάκριτος.

10 After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions, 11 since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned.

Paul admonishes Titus to shun trouble makers inside the church after giving them a couple of warnings about what they are doing. In the two preceding verses he encouraged Titus to promote teaching that leads to spiritual health and centers on doing good works. Also he is to "avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless." This is similar to Paul's encouragement to Timothy (**2 Tim. 2:14**): "Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening." Ταῦτα ὑπομίμησθε διαμαρτυρόμενος ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ μὴ λογομαχεῖν, ἐπ' οὐδὲν χρήσιμον, ἐπὶ καταστροφῇ τῶν ἀκουόντων.

A major source of the problems with wayward members emerges from the mid-50s to the end of the first century with growing numbers of professing Christians with teachings and beliefs in contradiction to the apostolic Gospel preached by Paul and by the apostles. These false gospels contained not only beliefs about Christ and salvation clearly contradicted by the apostolic Gospel, but also the advocating of patterns of behavior clearly considered immoral and sinful.<sup>17</sup> The NT writers from the late 50s on speak often about

<sup>16</sup>One should note that Paul here presents essentially what he had already written to them in a letter prior to First Corinthians. This letter is not contained in the New Testament, and represents one of two such letters out of four written by Paul to the church at Corinth. For more details, see my "Paul's Relation to the Corinthian Believers," cranfordville.com: <http://cranfordville.com/paul-cor.htm>.

<sup>17</sup>The modern terms of heresy and orthodoxy do not really fit the New Testament documents. The Greek word αἵρεσις, *haire-sis*, originally meant 'choice' and designated a particular philosophical school:

false teachers (ψευδοδιδάσκαλος; also ψευδάδελφος, ψευδαπόστολος, ψευδοπροφήτης) and false teaching (ψευδοδιδασκαλία). Interestingly, in the materials of the late 50s to the mid 60s -- Prison Epistles, Pastoral Epistles, 2 Peter, Jude -- a strong emphasis is given to the apostolic Gospel as 'sound teaching,' ὑγιαίνοντων λόγων (e.g., 2 Tim. 1:13). The point of this is that the apostolic Gospel leads to spiritually healthy behavior, in contrast to false teaching that leads to immoral conduct.

Thus it is out of this background 'big' picture perspective that James' words must be understood. His writing comes in the midst of all of these materials in the late 50s, and will reflect essential agreement with the perspectives of Paul, Peter, and Jude. Although the letters of John come some forty to fifty years later, there is essential agreement with them as well. Every congregation across the eastern Mediterranean world had its own way of dealing with deviant teaching and behavior, but these NT writers put forth some basic guidelines to enable each congregation to approach such problems in a spiritually healthy manner.

**a) The scenario, v. 19.**

Ἀδελφοί μου, ἐάν τις ἐν ὑμῖν πλανηθῆ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ ἐπιστρέψῃ τις αὐτόν,

*My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another,*

The nature of the conditional protasis here in the Greek sentence is to set up a possible scenario that James assumes will happen on occasion, but not one that he asserts is existing at the time on a wide spread basis. Clearly the τις ἐν ὑμῖν, *someone among you*, targets a member of the Christian community, rather than an outsider; note τις ἐν ὑμῖν in 5:13, 14; cf. also 3:13 (Τίς...ἐν ὑμῖν), similar is τις ὑμῶν (1:5) and τις...ἐξ ὑμῶν (2:16).

**What has happened to this member? First**, he πλανηθῆ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας, *has been caused to wander away from the Truth*. The verb πλανηθῆ from πλανάω comes out of a literal sense of wandering off an established path in lostness, which readily lends itself to the NT idea of getting off the established path of the Gospel into false teaching and improper behavior.<sup>18</sup> Also built into the word group is the sense that the getting off the established path has come about through deception by false teaching from pseudo-teachers claiming to be Christians. James has already warned his readers in 1:16 to not allow themselves to be led astray regarding the true nature of temptation and sin (Μὴ πλανᾶσθε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί). The aorist passive voice form of πλανηθῆ underscores outside influences that have gotten him off the established path of the Gospel. These are not named directly but unquestionably are implied by James.

What the individual has strayed away from is τῆς ἀληθείας, *the Truth*. In modern definitions this is often mistakenly understood as deviate belief from established orthodoxy. Such thinking did not exist in apostolic Christianity. Early Christianity functioned within the framework of the Old Testament understanding of Truth. It is not a set of beliefs. John 14:6 is the clearest Christian expression of its meaning: ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ζωὴ. Jesus' powerful declaration asserts that He is the complete and totally consistent expression of who God is. This means that the path (ἡ ὁδὸς) to God is solely Jesus. He alone fully reflects the reality

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αἵρεσις, from αἰρεῖν, is used in classical Greek to indicate: a. "seizure," e.g., of a city (Hdt., IV, 1); b. "choice" (αἰρέομαι mid.), in the general sense of choice of a possibility or even to an office; "inclination" (opp. φυγή); and c. "resolve" or "enterprise," "effort directed to a goal," almost προαίρεσις (Plat. Phaedr., 256c). The last meaning persists in Hellenism and occasionally in Christian literature (Ditt. Syll.3, 675, 28; Herm. s., 9, 23, 5).

From this there develops in Hellenism the predominant objective use of the term to denote a. "doctrine" and especially b. "school." The αἵρεσις of the philosopher, which in antiquity always includes the choice of a distinctive Bios, is related to δόγματα to which others give their πρόσκλισις. It thus comes to be the αἵρεσις (teaching) of a particular αἵρεσις (school). [*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 1:180-81.]

αἵρεσις shows up nine times in the NT, with six of them in Acts: 1x = 'sect of the Sadducees'; 2x = Pharisees; 3x = Christianity. In Gal. 5:20 and 1 Cor. 11:19, it refers to divisions inside the community of believers, and in 2 Pet. 2:1 to divisive teachings. In these non-Acts uses, αἵρεσις refers to teachings contrary to the apostolic Gospel that divides a religious community by sowing discord and animosity.

<sup>18</sup>The verb πλανάω is from a word group including πλάνη, (noun), πλανήτης (personal noun); πλανάω (verb), and πλάνος, ον (adjective).

"πλανάω means "to lead astray," πλανάομαι "to go astray," πλάνη and πλάνος "going astray," πλανήτης and πλάνης "one who leads astray," all at first in a topographical sense, which persists into the Hell. period." [*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 6:229.]

of God (ἡ ἀλήθεια) in His character and being; therefore the only way to spiritual life (ἡ ζωή) is Jesus.

In James' previous mentioning of Truth, the word of truth (λόγῳ ἀληθείας; 1:18), and lying against the Truth (ψεύδεσθε κατὰ τῆς ἀληθείας, 3:14), he has clearly reflected this early Christian understanding. The message of the Truth is the Gospel. To lie against the truth in claiming to be wise is to claim a form of wisdom totally contradicted by the character of God who is the exclusive source of wisdom.

The deception referenced by James here is that of a member whose understanding of God and whose behavior is inconsistent with God in His being and behavior. The influences pushing such deception are not directly stated, but could have come from the utterly corrupt Greco-Roman culture these Jewish Christians were living in. The likelihood is that teachers in their community developed deviate beliefs about God and about the high standards of Christian morality and advocated them to members of their church. The individual referenced by James was one of the members who temporarily bought into this false thinking.

**Second**, this individual has come under the influence of καὶ ἐπιστρέψῃ τις αὐτόν, **and someone turn him back**.<sup>19</sup> The scenario painted by James is different from the one depicted by Paul in Gal. 6:1, ἐὰν καὶ προλημφθῇ ἄνθρωπος ἐν τινι παραπτώματι, **even if a person is detached in a transgression**. Paul sets up a similar third class protasis with the member getting caught in a willful act of rebellion against God. His focus is on the careful way the members of the church are to approach trying to turn this person around in repentance. James assumes that another church member has already successfully helped the wayward member turn his life around in obedience to God. The turning around done here, ἐπιστρέψῃ, is turning the wayward member back to the Truth in following it, rather than deviating from it. That is, turning him back to God rather than away from God where he was going. Now his behavior becomes consistent with the character of God, who has regained control over his life.

What should always be remembered in such situations is that the influences that deceive are influences that claim to be God's truth. Inside the Christian community, no false teacher would have ever dared to say to the community, "I am a false teacher and intend to give you false teaching." To the contrary, they always made a claim to having a better knowledge of the Truth. In that first century Christian world with no canonical New Testament available, and only the Old Testament scriptures for authoritative standards, how could an individual know what was and was not consistent with God? Here is where the apostles' focus on the Gospel was central. At its core was the affirmation of Jesus as the Son of God who brought to humanity the clear picture of God. God is absolute purity and holiness. He also is love and compassion at a level unknown in human experience apart from the crucifixion of Christ for sinners. If in that apostolic Gospel they gain a clear understanding of God through Christ, any teaching that contradicts or diminishes that portrait is a false gospel that should be rejected completely. The Christian leaders such as the apostles, Paul, James and others not only taught the true Gospel, but they also lived it day in and day out in sincerity and genuineness. Their example modeled true commitment and behavior coming from God through the Gospel. This is why the strong emphasis against false teaching in the latter writings of the New Testament always link deviate belief with deviate behavior.<sup>20</sup> Screw up your understanding of who God is and you will never behave yourself in a manner consistent with His character.

#### **b) The blessing, v. 20.**

γινωσκέτω ὅτι ὁ ἐπιστρέψας ἁμαρτωλὸν ἐκ πλάνης ὁδοῦ αὐτοῦ σώσει ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐκ θανάτου καὶ καλύψει πλῆθος ἁμαρτιῶν.

**you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.**

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<sup>19</sup>“James’ language once more evokes that of the prophets, who called for a ‘turning back’ to the Lord (see LXX Hos 3:5; 5:4; 6:1; Amos 4:16; Joel 2:12; Hag 2:17; Zech 1:3; Mal 2:6; 3:7; Isa 6:10; 9:12; 46:8; 55:7; Jer 3:12; 4:1; Ezek 18:30–32). In the NT, compare Matt 13:15; Luke 1:16–17; 22:32; Acts 3:19; 9:35; 11:21; 2 Cor 3:16; 1 Thess 1:9. The practice of fraternal correction is clearly similar to that described in Matt 18:15–18, which follows the parable of the lost sheep (18:12–14), with its implied ideal of “seeking the one that has wandered” (*poreutheis zētei to planōmenon*). Paul also advocates mutual correction in the community (Gal 6:1).” [Luke Timothy Johnson, vol. 37A, *The Letter of James: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 338.]

<sup>20</sup>One of my legendary professor mentors at SWBTS in Ft. Worth was Dr. T.B. Maston. He used to stress that orthopraxis was just as important as orthodoxy. You might be completely orthodox in your doctrinal beliefs, but if your behavior did not measure up to the demands of the Gospel you were a heretic.

James' primary point in this sentence is to encourage the person helping wayward members back to obeying God. He makes two positive points that stand in synonyms parallelism to each other. One aspect of this statement has more to do with the history of interpretation than to the statement itself. It emerges out of the question of whose 'soul' is saved and whose sins are covered. Those of the repentant member? Or, those of the one reclaiming the wayward member? This will be treated in the exegesis.

Of interest also is the observation that knowing something, γινώσκοντες ὅτι (1:3), was the basis for joy at the very outset of this collection of sermon insights. Now James closes with knowing something else is encouraging also. To some extent, gaining spiritual insight forms the 'book ends' of the document and sets the tone for everything between these two common emphases.

The core verb γινωσκέτω, *let him know*, targets the one turning the sinner back to the Truth with the encouragement contained in the ὅτι clause as the verb object. A few manuscripts (B 1505 2138 syr<sup>h</sup>) read γινώσκετε ὅτι which can be translated either as indicative, *you know*, or imperative, *know*.<sup>21</sup> This seems to be an effort to address the admonition more directly to the readers of the letter and to clear up any confusion about whose sins are being forgiven and covered. The idea of knowing here from γινώσκω stresses understanding gained experientially, rather than theoretically. The blessing defined by the ὅτι clause can be seen and experienced. Also the present tense form of the verb underscores ongoing realization, rather than a momentary insight.

**The first encouragement** is ὁ ἐπιστρέψας ἀμαρτωλὸν ἐκ πλάνης ὁδοῦ αὐτοῦ σώσει ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐκ θανάτου, *the one who has turned the sinner from the error of his way will save his life from death*. The reclamer is referenced back to ἐπιστρέψῃ τις αὐτόν, *someone may turn him around* by repeating ἐπιστρέψας. What he turns the sinner away from is πλάνης ὁδοῦ αὐτοῦ, *the error of his way*, goes back to πλανηθῆ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας, *may be led astray from the Truth*. This subsequent depiction, πλάνης ὁδοῦ αὐτοῦ, lends emphasis to a behavior issue derived from false teaching.

In the hugely corrupt and immoral atmosphere of the first century Roman empire, one can easily understand the tendency of false teaching to reduce drastically the high standards of morality set forth in the Gospel. Jude 4 makes just this charge: παρεισέδυσαν γὰρ τινες ἄνθρωποι, οἱ πάλαι προγεγραμμένοι εἰς τοῦτο τὸ κρίμα, ἀσεβεῖς, τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν χάριτα μετατιθέντες εἰς ἀσέλγειαν καὶ τὸν μόνον δεσπότην καὶ κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἀρνούμενοι, *For certain intruders have stolen in among you, people who long ago were designated for this condemnation as ungodly, who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ*. Conversion to Christianity from paganism meant a tremendous shift in standards of behavior. Not surprisingly some began to reject this shift and found in the idea of God's grace a supposed justification that God was no so concerned about the behavior of people.<sup>22</sup> Jude labels such thinking τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν χάριτα μετατιθέντες εἰς ἀσέλγειαν, *twisting the grace of our God into gross immorality*. They in their teaching ἐνυπνιαζόμενοι σάρκα, *defile the flesh* (v. 8); they reduce living to animalistic levels, φυσικῶς ὡς τὰ ἄλογα ζῶα ἐπίστανται (v. 10); they εἰσιν γογγυσταὶ μεμψίμοιροι κατὰ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας ἑαυτῶν πορευόμενοι, καὶ τὸ στόμα αὐτῶν λαλεῖ ὑπέρογκα, θαυμάζοντες πρόσωπα ὠφελείας χάριν, *are grumblers and malcontent indulging in their own lusts, are bombastic in speech, flattering people to their own advantage* (v. 16).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>“The third person imperative γινωσκέτω may have been changed to the second person plural imperative γινώσκετε in order to make the verb agree in number with the plural address ἀδελφοί μου (my brothers and sisters) in v. 19. Or γινωσκέτω may have been changed to γινώσκετε in order to avoid the ambiguity of whether the subject of the verb is the person who converts someone or the person who is converted. Some translations read ‘you should know’ or ‘you may be sure’ (so NRSV and REB), and others read ‘he should know’ or ‘he may be sure’ (NAB, NJB).” [Roger L. Omanson and Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament: An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger's Textual Commentary for the Needs of Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 479.]

<sup>22</sup>Perhaps the most bizarre and disgusting example of this happened at Corinth with the church member living in incest with his mother as a supposed sign of superior spirituality. Cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-8.

<sup>23</sup>A very similar portrait to the one in Jude is found in 2 Peter 2:1-22. 2 Tim. 3:1-9 paints a similar picture of false teachers advocating immoral behavior in the name of the Gospel. Interestingly there Paul signals that their target groups inside the Christian communities were young, immature wives in the church who served as the entrance point into the believing communities. In 1 Tim. 4:1-5 another stream of false teachers would advocate asceticism, and also a pagan pursuit of wealth in the name of Christianity (6:2b-10). At the heart of most all this false teaching was a complete failure to understand and accept the Gospel's powerful emphasis upon sinfulness in human life.

Needless to say the same tendency remains true in the modern world. The combination of perverting the grace of God into permissiveness and ignorance of the utter ‘sinfulness of sin’ leads to most of the perversions of Christianity today.

The marvelous assumption of James is that the deceived church member, now labeled a ἁμαρτωλὸν, a sinner, has been turned away from this corrupted version of the Gospel and back to the Truth: ὁ ἐπιστρέψας ἁμαρτωλὸν ἐκ πλάνης ὁδοῦ αὐτοῦ. The blessings coming to the reclaimed church member center on σώσει ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐκ θανάτου, shall deliver his life from death.<sup>24</sup> Sin and spiritual death are closely linked in James: 1:15; 2:9; 4:17, as well as generally in the Bible.<sup>25</sup> This is death in its inclusive scope of killing spiritual life and vitality when allowed to go unchecked as set forth in 1:15. Thus the rebuke of sinfulness by a Christian brother caught up in it becomes an important principle not only in early Christianity, but it also existed in wider circles of the ancient world.<sup>26</sup> In the philosophical tradition of that day, willingness to confront a friend making bad decisions was the sign of genuine friendship. Unwillingness to confront signaled the friendship was phoney.

**The second encouragement** is καὶ καλύψει πλῆθος ἁμαρτιῶν, and will cover a multitude of sins. Often this statement has been linked to Prov. 10:12 in the LXX: μίσος ἐγείρει νεῖκος, πάντας δὲ τοὺς μὴ φιλονεικούντας καλύπτει φιλία, Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses. But this connection is highly questionable simply because James is clearly talking about forgiveness of sins while Proverbs is talking about ignoring faults between friends for the sake of friendship.

James says that the sins of the sinner will be covered: καλύψει. Perhaps he had in mind the Day of Final Judgment when the repentant church member discovers his sins to be hidden from God's eyes by the blood of Christ. That is, they are forgiven. But forgiveness is not limited to the eschatological future. It is granted immediately upon repentance so that new relationship with God can begin. What James alludes to here more likely corresponds to David's plea in Psalm 51, particularly v. 12: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit." The sins committed in the time of 'the way of error' are no longer standing between the repentant church member and his God. They are covered from God's eyes in forgiveness.

Are there blessings to the church member leading the wayward member back to obedience? One only needs to engage in such ministry to discover the profound joy and excitement seen in the return to obedience by a wayward Christian. The gaps in the community of believers left by waywardness are now plugged up and the community is able to function at full effectiveness once more. The spiritual health and vitality of the

<sup>24</sup>Whose life, ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ, is being saved here? That of the sinner? Or, that of the reclamer? Ambiguity in the Greek text led several later copyists (P<sup>74</sup> B 1292 1611 2138 it<sup>ff</sup>) to shift some words around to clarify the issue. The words ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐκ θανάτου (his soul/life from death) are shifted to read ψυχὴν ἐκ θανάτου αὐτοῦ (a soul/life from death itself). The thrust of the text is pretty clear that it is the sinner's ψυχὴν that is being delivered.

But the issue is blurred somewhat from the LXX reading of Ezek. 3:21, σὺ δὲ ἐὰν διαστείλῃ τῷ δικαίῳ τοῦ μὴ ἁμαρτεῖν, καὶ αὐτὸς μὴ ἁμάρτη, ὁ δίκαιος ζωὴ ζήσεται, ὅτι διεστείλω αὐτῷ, καὶ σὺ τὴν σεαυτοῦ ψυχὴν ῥύσῃ, If, however, you warn the righteous not to sin, and they do not sin, they shall surely live, because they took warning; and you will have saved your life. Clearly God indicated that for Ezekiel to warn the people of God not to sin would rescue the prophet from the harsh judgement of God for failing to do the job assigned him by God.

Some have linked this passage up to what James says in 5:20 with the assumption that the reclamer saves his life and covers the sins of the wayward member by turning him from his error. But this is really farfetched and stretches the matter well past a breaking point. It fails to understand the unique job assignment of Ezekiel, and wrongly extends this to James 5:20. The inclination to interpret James this way most likely indicates the commentator has never personally experienced what James is talking about and so has no experiential knowledge (as James indicates by γινώσκέτω) of the tremendous blessing in reclaiming a Christian brother for the Gospel.

Much more likely is the connection of 3:18 to 5:20 in the blessing coming to the reclamer: καρπὸς δὲ δικαιοσύνης ἐν εἰρήνῃ σπείρεται τοῖς ποιούσιν εἰρήνην, And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

<sup>25</sup>"The connection of sin and death is widespread (see Deut 30:19; Job 8:13; Pss 1:6; 2:12; Prov 2:18; 12:28; 14:12; Wis 2:24; Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:56; 2 Bar. 85:13; T. Abr. 10:2–15)." [Luke Timothy Johnson, vol. 37A, *The Letter of James: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 338.]

<sup>26</sup>"The 'rescue operation' by moral correction vividly recalls the imagery of 1:15, which describes the inexorable progress from desire to sin and from sin to death (*thanatos*). In Matt 18:15, the result of such correction is 'gaining your brother' (*ekerdēsaton adelphon sou*). Ezekiel also spoke of the prophetic rebuke in terms of life and death: 'If you warn the righteous man not to sin and he does not sin, he surely shall live, because he took warning; and you will have saved your life' (Ezek 3:21). That mutual correction was a necessary part of genuine friendship and life together was also axiomatic for those living the philosophical life in the ancient world; see, e.g., Hierocles, *On Duties* 4.25.53; Dio, *Or.* 77/78:37–45; Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* 30–37 (Mor. 70D–74E); Philodemus, *On Frankness* 37; PA 5:18; 1QS 5:24–25." [Luke Timothy Johnson, vol. 37A, *The Letter of James: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 338–39.]



