

## Living Word Small Group Study Guide

January 19, 2020 - January 25, 2020

Sermon Series: You Be the Judge

Week Three: "Restoration"

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week's Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday's sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

### **Suggested Opening Prayer:**

*Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.*

*Almighty God, You continually call Your people to Yourself. We pray, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, for You to draw us into such a warm and binding relationship that we may faithfully follow You all the days of our lives. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

### **This Week's Sermon Theme:**

We are more called to be guides than judges. In judging another person's wrongdoing, we move toward restoring that person to faith rather than putting them out to face their struggles on their own. It's an issue of discipleship.

**Sunday Scripture Reading:** James 5:19-20 (A group member should read the passage aloud)

### **For Group Discussion:**

#### ***What does the text actually SAY?***

*The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.*

Who does James address the passage to? (5:19)

What is James concerned might happen to a member of the congregation? (5:19)

What does James hope another member of the congregation will do if this happens? (5:19)

What truth does James ask the reader to remember? (5:20)

What language is used to refer to the "wanderer"? (5:20)

What two things happen as a result of restoring a wanderer to the faith? (5:20)

## **What questions does the text raise for us?**

*The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged.*

What does the warning in verse 19 imply about the possibility of believers wandering from the truth?

What does “wandering from the truth” really mean? Do you think James has in mind believers wandering away from Christianity entirely, or believers accepting a poor theology?

Does the passage make demands upon other Christians who see someone wander from the truth? What are those demands? Do they apply equally to every other Christian who knows the wanderer?

Why should fellow believers turn back a wanderer? Does the passage address how to do that?

Does the passage imply any kind of responsibility for the wanderer’s ultimate fate if fellow believers do not attempt to bring them back? What if they were to try to win them back, but fail?

How exactly would restoring someone to the faith “cover over a multitude of sins”? Do you think this is referring only to forgiveness of past sins? Or might it be referring to future sins that a wanderer might commit if they were not restored to the faith?

How do the words regarding restoring a fallen sinner relate to the sermon series’ theme of judgment?

## **Commentary on the text:**

*The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.*

Read also: Deuteronomy 11:27-28; Proverbs 21:16; Proverbs 28:10; Wisdom of Solomon 5:6 (Apocrypha); Ezekiel 3:1-11; Ezekiel 18:1-32; Matthew 18:15;18; Galatians 6:1

The book of James is the New Testament’s contribution to what is known as “wisdom literature” – which always has to do with the right ordering of practical life. It exists in almost every culture; but James is a fascinating example of the genre, because it exhibits traits of both the wisdom literature of the Greco-Roman culture from which it came, but also of the Jewish wisdom literature of the Old Testament! Some verses echo the writings of Greek philosophers such as Seneca, Plato, Cicero, and Plutarch, but always within the framework of applying the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, in light of the confession of Jesus Christ as Messiah and Lord.

Notice how James’ language of “wandering from the truth” or “wandering astray” reflects the same metaphor of “wandering from the path” as used in the Old Testament admonitions in Deuteronomy 11:27-28, Proverbs 21:16, Proverbs 28:10, and, if you have access to the Apocrypha, Wisdom of Solomon 5:6. Judeo-Christian exhortation has long used the metaphor of “two paths” that human beings have the freedom to choose from – the “way of truth/righteousness” and the “way of error.” To choose the “way of truth” is evidence of wisdom; to choose the “way of error” is evidence of folly.

This worldview is sometimes viewed as offensive in contemporary culture, which regards every opinion as equally worthy of consideration, and every “way” potentially a valid option. For people in James’ culture, there may have been many “ways,” but only one was the “way of truth” – all others were the “way of error.” Moral correction was therefore an expected behavior... in fact, it practically

defined the Greek philosopher's or the Jewish prophet's occupation! The judging required to exercise such correction was not done with an attitude of moral superiority, but with a worldview that understood humanity as subject to self-deception and error. All people, therefore, need the honest assistance of others to stay on the "path of righteousness." Mutual correction, like mutual prayer, is a necessary component of human life, or else the "path of truth" becomes indistinguishable from the "way of error." The ancient teachers understood the fragility of an intentional community attempting to live to a defined ethos, and how deviation from its norms of behavior could be devastating for its members. The biblical references to the prophetic call to moral correction, and the devastating consequences for the community of failure to address it, are practically uncountable – but Ezekiel 3:1-11 and 18:1-32 show how one Old Testament prophet lived out God's call to such correction, and the expectation of mutual accountability for it within the Jewish community. Jesus' parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18:15-18) is one of the best-known New Testament examples of the need to "seek the one that has wandered," and Paul covers the same territory as James in Galatians 6:1.

In the early Christian community of James and of Paul, evidence of salvation through faith in Christ was seen most fully in living a life that reflected the ethos of Jesus Christ. If behavior strayed from this ethos, it was evidence of lapsed faith in Christ. Living according to the ethos did not save one's soul, but one whose soul was saved would choose to live according to the ethos. Restoring a fallen believer to the community, then, was a life-and-death matter, as the correction called for was equivalent to the saving of a soul. To reach out with the word of truth, restoring the straying member to the path of truth, was to literally save the other from death. This is why James states emphatically that to restore a wanderer is to "save him from death." Failure to provide such correction was itself understood as sin in the community, as the community ethos included the responsibility to offer such accountability. Thus, attempting to restore the one who strayed also "covered over a multitude of sins" – the sin of failing to make an effort to restore a valued member of the community, as well as the sins the straying member would commit while walking the "way of error."

### **Final Thoughts for Discussion:**

*The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.*

Does the Christian community today still exhibit mutual commitment to living to the ethos of Jesus Christ?

Do you believe there is a "way of truth" and a "way of error," or that there are many "ways of truth"? How does your answer affect the call to community accountability that James affirms?

Can you identify specific people who you know have wandered from the truth?

What are some practical steps you could take to bring them back?

Do you feel equipped to take those steps? If not, what are some practical steps you could take to become better equipped?

The lesson suggests that covering over a multitude of sins could imply the preventing of future sin that an unrestored believer might commit. What ramifications for the individual, for their circle of friends, for their community, or even for the world might the prevention of those sins entail?

What does this suggest about the depth of impact restoring a wanderer from the faith might have?

Many parents today struggle with the fact that their youth or adult children have wandered from the faith. Groups for mutual prayer and support can be helpful in that struggle. If you are interested in such a group, contact Val Novatny, Director of Congregational Care, at [vnovatny@livingwordumc.org](mailto:vnovatny@livingwordumc.org).

**Suggested Closing Prayer:**

*Holy God, lead us to the places where we can be part of Your work of restoration. Remind us of those in our lives who have wandered from the faith, and give us the words to remind them of Your faithfulness and love. In all things, let us be bearers of Your grace. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior, Amen.*