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**James 5:19-20**

- 19 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back,  
20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

**My Brother's Keeper**

These two verses conclude the book of James. This is a book that calls us to action and to put into practice the word of God. It says to us that if we really believe, if we really trust God's word, then that will lead to action. The thought of believing the truth of God but yet not seeking to live it out sincerely is irreconcilable to James.

He ends this book not as you would typically think a letter would be ended, but more like a sermon. He tells us in the book to "Go, do this." But curiously, he does not just say, "Go, do this," he actually is saying to go, find those who are not doing it, and help them. It is a particular and specific call. To understand it, we need to remind ourselves of what we looked at last week. Remember last week we talked about prayer, but there were a few verses there that described something for us. Please go back to 5:13-14:

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

The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another; pray for one another that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. James, in addressing the

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communities and closing out the letter says to live a life of prayer. If you are happy and things are going great, sing to the Lord; praise him. If you are in trouble and things are not going great, pray. If you're sick, call for the elders and ask them to anoint you with oil and to pray for you. Then he says, don't stop there, pray for one another, confess your sins to one another. What becomes clear is that James is describing for us is a community of believers who are in close personal relationship. They are so close that they actually confess their sin to one another, share their spiritual needs with one another, and pray for one another.

One of the things that becomes clear in that paragraph is that on some occasion sin is connected to sickness. Now, this is a dangerous thought. The Bible warns us against assuming or thinking that because someone is sick, therefore, they have sinned. The Bible does teach us that all sickness and death does come from the root of sin in the world. Things are not as they should be in the world; things are not right. The problem is sin, and sin has brought into this world a separation from God, a loss of peace, sickness, and death.

But there are times, certainly not every time, where personal sickness is related to personal sin. In an obvious way we have seen -- perhaps in our own lives-- we have seen where people have committed a certain sin, abused their body in a certain way, and there was a direct physical result. More than that, there are times and certain occasions where God will use sin to discipline us. Again, a lot of warnings and a lot of caution needs to go into that. I do not think there is a single person in here that has gone through their entire lives without ever being sick. I am sure that no one here would want to say that every time they have been sick it is because of some personal bad thing they did. We do not think that way. It is fascinating to consider James describing a family of believers that have deep personal relationships where they are sharing their needs, praying for one another and out of that comes this thought that if things are not going well; have you stopped to examine your life? Have you done that with the help of your Christian brother or sister?

That is kind of radical, isn't it? There is an individual in my life whom I have a role of discipling, even mentoring. . I had a concern recently about something that was going on in this person's life, so I called him several times and did not receive a returned call. The day was coming to an end, and I was going to bed, and my cell phone rings. I thought, should I get up and answer this call? It might be this person calling. So I decided to get up and look at the phone. It was this person whom I had previously called. I had to then decide whether to answer the phone or not. I answered the phone and began to share my

concern with this person. It did not go well. I was feeling a little self-righteous, maybe a lot self-righteous. It went from bad to bad to more bad. There was no name calling or shouting, but it was not productive. We agreed to end the phone call. The next day I called this person and invited him to have lunch.

This person happens to be my 20-year-old son. I went down and met him and had lunch with him. The conversation started like this, "Son, I am sorry. I did not handle the situation well. I think I judged you and I confess my sin." I confessed some sin to him, and how I handled the situation. He immediately responded by forgiving me and then asking for forgiveness. We then had a conversation in which I shared my thoughts and concerns. He responded. We ended well. We started poorly; we ended well.

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Now I do not want to give you the impression that what James describes here in terms of confessing sins to one another is always, "I have sinned against you, and you have sinned against me; let's confess that sin." Nor do I want to give you the impression that it always ends well. In fact, if anything, I would tell you that it is challenging. We are a diverse body. We have white, black -- various ethnic groups.

Next week, we are celebrating our diversity. Stop and think about how ambitious that is for people from all kinds of backgrounds and cultures to mix their lives together; share their lives; confess their sins. I would like it if a husband and wife could get along. I would really like it if everyone from one race could get along. We are going to introduce all of this diversity? Yes, because in Christ, walls come down, barriers come down, sin is forgiven, intimacy in relationship is experienced. In fact, I would say this is a part of what God does in relationships. We relate not only to the people we like, not only to the people who like us, not only to the people we have a lot in common with, but we begin to have deep and personal growing relationships with people we would never in a million years choose to be our friends.

Some of you would actually say that you like your pastor. "He is an old white guy, and I like him, and he is the first one like that who I have ever had as a friend." This is what happens in a home group. You go to a home group, and you look around, and you see that there are a lot of people unlike yourself. "I'm not sure that these are the people I would hang out with. But, my church tells me that I am supposed to do this," And this is the way we start to build relationships. We start going to our home group, and then we find ourselves hanging out together. Watch out, because you will start to like those people. This is

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the way it works. But I don't want to give you the impression that it is easy, or that it always ends well when there is a conflict between you and another person.

I had another opportunity recently when a brother-- a very close friend -- confessed sin to me. I had an opportunity to observe a little bit of that. I did not have to go confront. I understood that it would be a sin that I could relate to. I had the privilege of just being there for this friend and offering to pray with him and for him. Now, the temptation for me as a pastor is that I need to have something going on spiritually; I need to solve this. When appropriate, we help one another by speaking the truth. But, sometimes we also just need to listen, and we need to pray. That is where it all begins. This is something we can all do.

Here at the end of James, he is describing a community of relationships where we are growing. But some of you have perfected the "Heisman." You have the stiff-arm perfected and keep others away from you. What is precious is the ball. You have it tucked under your arm. We can see it, but you are keeping others away from you. You have developed all kinds of skills to do that, and you've even convinced yourself that you meet that need in other ways. What I want to say to you is that many disclaimers and disqualifiers are needed here. It takes time and trust. It does not happen automatically. There is a need for discretion. But God wants us to be growing deeper in relationships all the time.

I have the privilege in a number of relationships of confessing sin, asking for help, asking for prayer. I want that, and I want that in an increasing way for myself and for all of us. This is part of the definition of what it means to be a Christian. We have come to the knowledge that we have sinned and we need a savior. We've got a doctrine of sin that is not weak and puny, but robust. God sent his son to die on a cross for the penalty of my sin. That is how big my sin is. In an attitude of weakness and humility, we learn to trust in a savior who is so freeing for us in relationship, intimacy, mutual confession, and with wisdom we can now pray for one another.

Well, that is the overall context here, but these last two verses shift a little bit. There is a nuance here, because this person that has gone astray, this wanderer is no longer saying, "Hey, let's confess sin to one another; let's share our lives, let's live life together." This person has gone into sin and has left the truth. They are wandering from the truth. James ends his letter by saying, "You go get them! You go after them and retrieve this person."

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We see disenfranchised people around us all the time. Brother Kareem shared with us the description of some of the people who are living right around the community of this church facility. They are lower income, struggling to stay on level, education-wise, needing help and assistance. We understand that this pleases God as we come alongside the people who are made in the image of God and ask if we can help them. Not for me up here and you down there, but let me just get into your life and be a part of it. Well, spiritually, that is the picture here.

I had a dear friend back in college who revealed that he had an ongoing struggle with homosexuality. He was trying to get some help. He was seeing a college minister and counselor. This counselor came to me and asked me to be a friend. There is a lack of male, healthy friendships in this person's life. "I want you to be a friend and we want to help this young man overcome this debilitating sin in his life." Now see, there is an assumption working here. There is an assumption saying that although this man may struggle with this sin, he is made in the image of God, and should be loved. He is not down there and I am up here. There is also the assumption that this is sin.

After years of friendship, we went separate ways. Tragically, I suspected that he had completely wandered from the truth. A few years ago he initiated contact, sent a couple of emails. I thought, "Lord, what might you be doing here?" I discovered only a few weeks later that he had overdosed on drugs and was gone. When you retrieve someone who is wandering, you save his soul from death. James did this. You go after people, because it is a matter of life and death.

Today's sermon is about doing that. Do you know how to do that? Do you know how to retrieve someone who has wandered from the truth? I think that with this passage, it is operating under some assumptions that reveal the basic strategy for doing this.

First, we do this by warning the individual of the danger they are in. He says if you bring this person back, you save him or her from death and you cover a multitude of sin. In telling us that, he is saying that this is serious. We go in love, not in judgment-- like we are perfect and they are not -- but we go to retrieve them, because they are in a dangerous position spiritually. The language is the language of conversion, even though he is speaking of brothers.

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I am sure some of you may be asking about what is this "language of conversion." Well, the word that is used to describe "to bring him back" is a word that means "to convert, to change, or to change ones beliefs." He has left the truth, and you want to bring him back to the truth. We are seeking to save his soul from death. That is what happens when we get entrenched in a sin. We are deceived, we have left the truth. We have wandered from it. Even though we may know Christ, we still need a conversion of sorts. We need a change or a shift in our thinking.

So, that is what we want to talk about today. How do we bring a brother back? Well, there has to be a change in thinking and a warning that is given in love. We are going to break these down. What are we warning this person about? We are warning them about four things:

**1. Blindness Is Coming**

He tells us that this person has wandered from the truth. They are no longer on the path. It describes for us the problem when we are in sin. That problem is that we are under a certain deception. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you are a Christian. You have trusted in Christ. You may remember a time in your life where you were living in sin, doing all kinds of things that God didn't want you to do. You may have in your heart known that it was wrong. Just because you are made in the image of God you have a certain sense of "This is right and this is wrong." "In the end, we largely go forward in that state deceived. We are thinking that everything is fine. Conversion begins when the Holy Spirit comes into our lives and convicts us of sin. All of a sudden, we realize "God made me. God made me for a purpose. I am not fulfilling that purpose. I am living for myself. I am not living for God. One day I will give an account and be judged. I deserve judgment." God begins to reveal by his spirit our need for help; our need for a savior. It is the conviction of sin.

When we come to the Lord and we are in that place of knowing that forgiveness, and we choose sin, and we choose to go forward in that sin, do you know what happens? We are setting ourselves up for spiritual blindness and spiritual deception. We do it like this: here we are walking on the path and we say,

"Well, I am going to try this over here. I am going to step off of the path. I know I should not do this, but it is all right. I can see the path. The path is right next to me. I am not going to stay here. I am a Christian and I am going to stay on the path. I am just going to step off of the path for just a minute. Let me take a few steps over here

while I see the path. The path is still close by. I can still see the path, so I know that I am fine."

Then, one day, we get down here and the path is turned, and we are here and the path is nowhere in sight. We have wandered from the truth and we cannot see the path. We do not have an idea if the path is in front of us or behind us, or if it is to our left or our right. We have fallen into a place of spiritual deception or blindness. Hebrews chapter 3:12-13, describe this. It is in the spirit of a warning.

Hebrews 3:12-13:

12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving

heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that

none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Take notes of several things in these two verses. There is the context of community. We help one another. We exhort one another. "Take care. I am warning you. Be careful, I don't want you to fall into an evil unbelieving heart." -- Leaving the truth, falling away from the living God, exhort one another, help one another "as long as it is called today." Then, there is this very helpful descriptive phrase: "that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

What happens is that we are over here; we have stepped off of the path. We know it is not right. All of a sudden our conscience is no longer bothered, and we are comfortable taking another step away, and another step away, and then another step away as we become hardened. Once, when we were on the path, and we looked over, and we told ourselves "I should not do that. "Well, I will do just a little bit of it." Then we do just a little bit more, until we get ourselves far away from God. These things over there, at one point, brought conviction, causing us to say

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that this is not right. But it is easy to lie now. It is easy to go to these places. It is easy to think that we could just try a little bit of this.

I owe some of my thinking today from John Owen, a Puritan writer of the 1600’s. He impacts us in his works on sin, temptation, and the mortification of sin. I want to share with you a quote, a couple of paragraphs long. Since Owen wrote it, two paragraphs takes about 45 minutes to read. It is heavy sledding for us. I have tried to adapt it for us. This is Owen making commentary on Hebrews 3:12-13. He begins by summarizing it. He says:

**John Owen:**

‘Take heed,’ says [the author of Hebrews], ‘use all means, consider your temptations, watch diligently; there is a treachery, a deceit in sin, that tends to the hardening of your hearts from the fear of God.’ The hardening here mentioned is to the utmost... sin tends to it, and every... lust will make at least some progress toward it. You that were tender, and used to melt under the word, under afflictions, will grow as some have profanely spoken, ‘sermon-proof and sickness-proof.’ You that did tremble as the presence of God, thoughts of death, and appearance before him, when you had more assurance of his love than now you have, shall have a stoutness upon your spirit not to be moved by these things. Your soul and your sin shall be spoken of and spoken to, and you shall not be at all concerned, but shall be able to pass over duties, praying, hearing, reading and your heart not in the least affected. Sin will grow a light thing to you; you will pass it by as a thing of naught; this it will grow to. And what will be the end of such a condition? Can a sadder thing befall you? Is it not enough to make any heart to tremble, to think of being brought into that estate wherein he should have slight thoughts of sin? Slight thoughts of grace, of mercy, of the blood of Christ, of the law, heaven, and hell, come all in at the same season. Take heed, this is that [which] your lust is working toward – the hardening of the heart, searing of the conscience, blinding of the mind, stupefying of the affections, and deceiving of the whole soul.

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What is he talking about? He's saying that at one time you were so sensitive to the word of God, but now you have become so hard, no sermon will bring you back. The most inspired, word based, gospel empowered, spirit empowered sermon does not touch you. You are sermon proof. You are sickness proof. Affliction does not get your attention. When you get sick you do not think, "Wow, let me examine myself." Nor do you think, "One day I am going to get really sick and I am going to die. One day that will come. That day will come and I will stand before the Lord." None of that gets our attention anymore. It is the hardness of heart that can come to us.

You that did tremble at the appearance of God, the thoughts of death, the appearance before him, when you had more assurance of his love than you have now shall have a stoutness upon your spirit, not to be moved by these things. Your soul and your sin shall be spoken of and spoken to and you shall not be at all concerned but shall be able to pass over duties, praying, hearing, reading, and your heart not in the least be affected.

Owen is saying, someone comes to you and says "Listen, let me talk to you about your soul. I am concerned." They talk right to you. They talk to you about your spiritual condition. While they are doing it, you know that you are not praying, you are not in the word, you are neglecting all that God would have you to do; but you are not in the least bit affected. He is describing a hard heart, and where we go when we choose to walk in sin.

And what will be the end of such a condition? Can a sadder thing befall you? Is it not enough to make any heart tremble to think of being in that estate wherein he should have small thoughts, slight thoughts of sin, small thoughts of grace, of mercy, of the blood of Christ, of the law of heaven and hell, come all in at the same season? All at once have slight thoughts of God and heaven and hell and the law, God's truth, God's mercy, the blood of Christ.

This last little bit is descriptive:

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Take Heed. This is that which your lust is working toward, the hardening of the heart; the searing of the conscious, blinding of the mind, stupefying of the affections and the deceiving of the whole soul.

When you go, friends, to a brother or a sister, who is in serious sin, one of the things you want to say in love is, "Listen. Sin deceives us. You are not thinking clearly. You will reach a point where you will no longer be sensitive to the things of God. You may already be there." When we see someone really wandering from the truth, this is hard for us in our culture, we have been taught that tolerance is a supreme virtue and that it is the supreme expression of love. Yes, we are all sinners, and there is a place where we must come and be accepting. But when we love someone, we must speak to them to let them know that the house is on fire, and it is time to get out!

One of the challenges as a parent is how much do I tell my kids about my past sin? You know I do not want to come in a self-righteous way and say, "I can't believe the things you do. I would never do those things." Well, I did most of them. I did some of them a lot better. Here is the problem. You want to be transparent. You don't want to be self-righteous. You want to meet them at a place where you can say, the gospel saved me. But as soon as I say, "You know what, I experimented with this or I did this and it was horrible. What comes into their minds? Well, Dad did it and he is okay." That is the stupidest thing in the world, isn't it? This is how the devil works.

My mom, when I was about six years old, was in a really bad car wreck. Her vision was blocked, she was turning, she pulled out, and she was hit. This is a long time ago. It was over 40 years ago. Car safety was not then what it is now. She was completely cut through her bottom lip and there were cuts to her face. She was in the hospital and when she was released she was in bed for several weeks getting back on her feet. When she tells me that story, I do not think, "Hey, it's okay for me to pull out in front of cars. Mom is okay." In the same way, it's so stupid for us to think, "I can run out and sin. Dad turned out alright."

Weeks after the accident, my Mom needed to go somewhere and she did not want to drive. She was afraid to drive. She called my Dad and said, "I need you to come take me." My Dad said, "No, I'm not coming." She got so mad at him. My Dad told me years later after the

incident, that it was the maddest he had ever seen her. Now what was he thinking? He was thinking that if she did not get into the car then, she may never drive again. He was thinking, "I am not spending the rest of our lives driving her where she needs to go. What is the point of that?"

Now she would never say in a million years to pull out in front of another car. "It's okay. I made it." That would be presumptuous as many others who have pulled out in front of other cars tragically did not make it and when they did, the price was severe. There is a blindness that comes. Think of this. Jesus is the light of the world.

John 1:4-5:

4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

What is the remedy for our spiritual blindness? Jesus is the remedy.

John 8:12,

Again Jesus spoke to them saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 3:19,

And this is the judgment; the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. Here is the remedy: come out of the darkness into the light, confess your sin to the Lord and to others

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that the light will shine on it and you might experience the grace of God. The

light is greater than the darkness.

**2. Warn them that the discipline of God is coming.**

When we save a person from wandering, we cover a multitude of sins. What happens to the person who has left the truth is they are in an uncovered position. Their sin is not confessed or dealt with and that sin separates them from God and puts them in a position where God will discipline them in his love.

Psalm 89:31-33

31 If they violate my statutes and do not keep my commandments,

32 then I will punish their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes,

33 but I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness.

God is saying under the old covenant, if someone wanders away from the truth, they say no, I am not going to do what God wants me to do. I will as a loving father, discipline them. We see that clearly expressed in Hebrews 12:4-6. Here is a wonderful passage that teaches how God disciplines beginning in verse 4:

4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.

6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

Notice in verse 4, the struggle is with sin and the result is the discipline of the Lord. This is the act of a loving, heavenly father. It is his love expressed to us and it is something not to be

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taken lightly. For the sake of time, I am going to pass through these last three points very quickly. I want to present them. I think it is helpful for us.

I think we're beginning to experience a fatherless generation. So many of you can say that you did not really have a dad, or the dad you had was distant and not involved in your discipline and life. Some of us now are parents. We are dads. We are not really comfortable with the mantle of loving discipline. We have almost seen these as separate traits. Discipline and love do not go together. The Bible explains that discipline is the expression of love. The father who doesn't discipline his son hates his son.

When I see one of my kids who says that they are going to disobey Dad -- especially when they were little -- and they would stand at the cupboard and they would see the chocolate there and ask if they could have the chocolate. "No," I say. There is dinner in 15 minutes." You can see them thinking about, Dad, dinner and the chocolate. "I think I am going to go with the chocolate." They will look right at you and reach in and take the chocolate. Now what does a good dad do? He disciplines. They knew that. They knew I was going to discipline. NOW what do I do? I REALLY discipline them. Obviously the discipline that you thought would work, was not sufficient. What is going to happen when I say, "Don't go into the street," and he looks at me and says, "Street? Dad? I'll take the consequences. They can't be that bad." God is a good father. He loves us. He wants to keep us out of the street. He disciplines us. It is so foolish to say that we were just going to go off and do this thing. My kids will ask me, "Why is it that I will do one thing wrong and other kids do it a hundred times and I get caught the first time?" I tell them it is because they belong to God.

Here is what happens. We sin, and immediately there are the circumstances. For example, pregnancy. Many of our greatest sins come in response to the discipline of the Lord in that moment. But at that point, we have an opportunity. There is a choice in that moment and it moves me deeply that many of you have children that were borne out of an act that did not please God, but THANK GOD FOR THIS CHILD. Thank you, Lord, that your grace abounds in my sin. By God's grace in that moment, you turn back. Some of our greatest sins come when we say are going to erase the discipline of the Lord. We don't erase the discipline of the Lord. Many of you say that you made the wrong choice and now it is too late. No, You can always turn back to God. Turn to him now. Turn out of the darkness and into the light.

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There was a lovely young woman in the youth group when I was pastoring the youth about 25 years ago. She had acquired a sexually transmitted disease. I went with her dad to confront the older man. We went into his house. His parents were present as he still lived at home and we confronted this man. A couple of years later this young woman came during an invitation time to me and asked if I would pray to God to forgive her. I don't tell you this to say that there will not be consequences, but I prayed for that woman and God healed her. It was verified through blood tests. It was not me, I just wanted to speak this word of hope. I don't care what you have done. Our God is a God of mercy. Come back to him. Come back to him. Don't run further because the discipline of the Lord will not stop pursuing you.

**3. Weakness Is Coming.**

There is a loss of spiritual strength, vitality and peace. Brother, turn from the sin, weakness is coming. You will lose your spiritual peace and your strength in the Lord. Your separation from the Lord will put you in a place where God will say that he will not bless what you are doing.

**4. Death Is Coming.**

This is ultimately James' point: Death is coming. In fact he says something that disturbs us. I believe that the Bible clearly teaches that once we are saved, we do not lose that salvation. James seems to be assuming that this person is not saved, although we cannot make that judgment. He tells us that we ought to hold out to him the danger of a spiritual eternity without God.

What do you mean? Well, I have sat many times with individuals who are making choices and you ask them "Please don't do that!" Many times I and other pastors have had the opportunity to talk to others in deep personal moments. I have been with the man who says, "I am leaving my wife. I am running off with this other person. God wants me to be happy. I believe God is okay with this. I know it is not exactly what he wants me to do."

I look that person straight in the eye and tell him, "Brother, I am not even sure that you are saved. I cannot pronounce judgment on your life. I would not begin to. I have always assumed you are a brother in the Lord, but I want to tell you, God tells us that when we go down this

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path, we need to stop and say, 'Have I even experienced the grace of God that brings salvation in my life?'" That is the warning that James gives here to the brother. He says, "I am just going to go out and do this miserable thing and say that God is okay with it." Now there is a difference here. We do not make this judgment. We don't know. But we ask the question, "Brother, do you even know the Lord." This is a dangerous and serious thing that you are doing.

The Bible begins with the story of the Creation, but we do not live in Paradise long do we? In the third chapter of Genesis, Adam and Eve sin. In the fourth chapter, their children are killing each other. It's horrible isn't it when you see your sin in your own children? It is hard to correct. God comes to Cain and asks, "Where is your brother?" Cain's response is, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Friends, this is the change that Jesus Christ brings into our lives. We go from hatred, jealousy and murder, and when we are confronted with our sins, we say, "That is not my problem" -- we go from that to a place where we *are* our brother's keeper, to a place where we say, "Well, I did not personally sin against him, but I am going to pursue him. He is mine. He is my responsibility. He belongs to the Lord, and I am going to pursue him!"

What a change Christ brings because of the love that we have experienced. Many times we need to be reminded that we do this in a spirit of gentleness and an attitude of prayer. We do not have all the answers. We ask questions, but God helps us to live in a community where we bring the wanderer back.

