



12. Get them back! (James 5:19-20)

A husband of a church member chanced upon the Pastor in a supermarket. After a bit of chit chat, he grabbed his arm, looked him in the eye and urged, "Son, you must join the Army of the Lord!" The man replied, "I'm already in the Army of the Lord, Pastor." Pastor inquired, "How come I don't see you in the church every Sunday?" Well", the husband replied, "I'm in the secret service."

I'm sure we can all point to someone associated with us who once seemed to run well as a Christian. Maybe they were part of our church, or part of another. But they no longer attend, or maybe just attend occasionally. Perhaps there is a very sad story attached. They once went to church and they professed Christ, but now they are a long way from Him.

We have a name for it don't we? It's called backsliding. It's a scriptural term: **Jer 14:7 Although our sins testify against us, O LORD, do something for the sake of your name. For our backsliding is great; we have sinned against you.** But as with all words, it can turn into a cliché and non Christians think it's a bizarre term. I prefer a new term that has been used by Rob Parsons and others recently – the Bringing back the Prodigals. In fact he has produced a book on it, has a website and regularly does preaching tours with it. More on that in a minute.

The letter of James focused beginning and end on the pressures and temptations believers face. Sometimes they just snap and stop having fellowship with believers or worse happens, they fall into some sort of sin that cuts them off from their faith. We sometimes just don't know what to make of their behaviour. How should we understand it. Let's see what James says:

● CHRISTIANS DO WANDER

It is very easy to be blasé about those who once ran well but have now gone away. I know I touch on something relevant to many Christian parents in our own fellowship who had children who once ran well, but have since slipped away from the faith they professed earlier. In fact, I'm sure that we all know someone who slipped away. It's a fact that the church in the UK is still hemorrhaging believers at a massive rate. Not only do we need to staunch the flow, but we need to get back our Prodigals. So why did they leave in the first place? Here's the result of a survey in Britain called "Gone but not Forgotten". It was a survey of leavers and here's the percentage they got for main reason for leaving

Unfulfilled expectations	22
Changes and chances	21
Loss of faith	18
Changing values	9
Stage of faith	6
Belonging factors	2
Childhood upbringing	1
High cost	1

Here's a few comments about these figures made by the authors: *Unfulfilled expectations can take many forms. Some people become disillusioned with the churches in general. They experience it as a 'money-making organisation' or find it hypocritical in some way or other. Some feel the church has not changed sufficiently in terms of their expectations, while others feel that it has changed too much and they cannot cope with such things as a change in the music.*

One of the major areas in which expectations are sometimes unfulfilled are in worship. Others have to do with the levels or quality of pastoral care. For some, the problems lie in the leadership style or in the church's teachings in areas such as sexual morality.

These reasons for leaving were found proportionately more among older people who left over the age of 20, than those who left prior to it. The most frequent comments had to do with the church failing to connect to the rest of life or people feeling bored with church or not interested in what it had to offer. Over one quarter felt that their concerns were not heard.

Changes and chances include a variety of circumstances in which people find themselves. Sunday employment is one example. The most frequently cited reason, however, was moving home. Patterns that have been disrupted by moving to a new location are not always easily taken up again. Single people, especially, may find the idea of entering a new church full of strangers too daunting. Young people who move to university often find that their new life-styles are not conducive to rising early on Sunday mornings. For others, the break-down of marriage can become a barrier to attendance as people fear what others will think or say. For older people, illness can be the factor. With a change in situation, habits are easily lost.¹

This tells us two things: there are people out there who have wandered off and unfortunately, Christians have played a part in their wandering! Here's a comment I often make: If I were given a pound for.... in this case, every story I hear of someone put off by Christians and Church .. then I would now be a very rich minister. Our imperative as we shall see in a minute, is to get them back!

But it tells us another thing. Where people move, they often fall out of religion or in reverse, if they are prodigals, their interest may be kindled by contact with Christians. There's an opportunity here. If you are on the mission team, make a mental note. That said, this applies to all of us – befriend your new neighbour. We do a welcome card which you can use. Take an advantage of an opportunity. Moving into a new community is a major source of returning prodigals.

So we know plenty of people who one ran well but now are nowhere before God. What do we do? Do we label them by calling them backsliders, wanderers or prodigals and say “what a pity?” and say “we must respect their point of view”. Rubbish. We get them back because

● WE ARE A RESTORING PEOPLE!

What is God's heart for the prodigal?

Luke 15: 4 "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety - nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety - nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

If we look back in the OT God gave chance after chance after chance for His wayward people to return. He's a God who is long-suffering and rich in mercy. The story of the Prodigal Son itself is an example of how God runs to meet those who would return to Him. God freely forgives those who repent. I'm sure if I asked for testimonies of restoration, I'd get plenty. Let me know if you have one. But here's someone else's.

This is the story of Glenn, who was a persistent criminal but found Jesus. Great you say, but when he got on the outside he started to backslide. He went and broke into a car showroom and stole their safe. It weighed a couple hundred pounds but he's a big guy. He carried it out and took it to the local woods. Worked on it for over two hours. And finally broke into the safe. And inside it was filled with Bible tracts. Has God got a sense of humour? You know, God's got a sense of humour.

God is a restoring God. He seeks out the wanderer and the lost so He can bring them back. And as we look at James we see that the church is a restoring body. We are charged with doing God's recovery work – it is the responsibility of all of us to bring the wanderers back *if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back* . I have a recovery insurance on my car if I should break down, which is very wise with the state on my car. It's with Britannia Rescue. They are very efficient because they don't have their own van. They use local agents to come out to me. In God's recovery business, we are the agents – we bring home the Prodigals. And that person may be you in the lives of your prodigal daughter or son, in the life of your prodigal friends or neighbours.

1 Take a look at <http://www.cra.org.au/pages/00000151.cgi>

So part of our mission as a church should be to bring the wanderers back. Let's remember that bringing prodigals back is different reaching the un-churched. The wanderers know the message of the gospel whereas the unchurched usually know next to nothing. We already have less distance to cover.

So it's our job? What do we need to do? I'm going to leave that one to hang and say, if you want to know more, come and hear Ian Bunce tomorrow. Part of what he plans to do is explore why people leave church and what gets them back. So please come and be encouraged. It's time to get our prodigals back!

● RESTORATION HAS WONDERFUL CONSEQUENCES

Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

This isn't about filling our pews again. Our prodigals are in danger. We have learned consistently that sin leads to death in whichever way you would care to describe it. Getting the wanderers back saves them from death. Simple as that. I'm not going into any theological argument about once saved, always saved and all that or whether they were believers or not before they backslid. I just leave you with verse 21. Our wanderers face death through sin. The wages of sin is death!

The message here is a strong one. Don't mess around. Do what you have to and get them back because you save them from death and as James says you cover over a multitude of sins. Who's sin. Their sins. *Ps 32:1 Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.* We're in the restoration business. Let's not hesitate to welcome wanderers back. Let's help them with issues in their life that bring death. Let's lead them back to the cross. Let's lead them to Jesus. Let's help them in the process of repentance. Let's show them forgiveness afresh – God's and ours, Let's show them that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

James said "Faith without works is dead". Let's not be words on this one. If we want them back, then let's go get 'em – bring them back. It's not just pray that they may see the light. It's proactive – get them back.

What can we do? We can pray. Pray for opportunities to share Christ. Pray that Jesus will take them to that point of longing in their hearts for Him again. Pray that you will understand what you need to do to get them back.

You could get more information on it, through Rob Parson's book or website www.prodigals.org.uk. Maybe we could consider getting Rob or someone from his organisation here.

As a church we need to become "prodigal friendly". That's something we should explore in the coming weeks with *The Way Forward*. It's our duty to. We are not just in the salvation business, but in the restoration business too. We lost 'em, let's bring 'em back and be prepared to do whatever to achieve that.

