

**20 – let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.**

In the Greek manuscripts, the opening phrase, “let him know,” has a variant reading. Some manuscripts have *γινώσκετε* (*ginōskete*), the common indicative verb, which would be rendered “you know that he who turns...” But the weight of manuscript evidence has *γινώσκέτω* (*ginōsketō*), an imperative, thus “he should know.” The problem with the reading “you know” is how it is to be applied. Is it addressed to the one who has turned a sinner from error, or to the sinner himself? The imperative, on the other hand, clearly addresses the one who has helped the wayward believer come to repentance and return to living obediently.

It is interesting that James ends his epistle with this admonition, encouraging each of us to extend a careful, wise, and loving hand to a brother or sister in the Lord who has followed the wrong path in his or her life. In fact, this forms a nice “bookend” to the epistle, for James began with a similar emphasis.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. (James 1:2-3)

A brother or sister in the Lord who “strays from the truth” creates not only a trial in their own life but this can also be trying times for those who must seek to “turn the sinner from the error of his way.” Yet even these difficult situations are ultimately to be received as that which strengthens our faith as we are called upon to trust the Lord all the more and to be strengthened in the truth and its application in each other’s lives.

*...he who turns a sinner from the error of his way* – One wonders if James has Lev 19:17 in mind when he was guided by the Ruach to write this.

You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. (Lev 19:17)

Here, to “not hate your fellow countryman in your heart” could well be applied to one’s fellow believer, for all believers are adopted children in the family of God. Thus, to “reprove your neighbor” means not only to show him when he has done that which is contrary to God’s Torah,

i.e., His divine instructions, but also to “reprove him” (יָכַח, *yakach*, “to rebuke, reprove, to mediate”), that is, to “turn him from the error of his way” by speaking the truth in love, even as Paul admonishes us.

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Messiah... (Eph 4:14-15)

To “speak the truth in love” does not mean to diminish the truth, even if to speak it may be received as judgmental. The discipline of the Lord may be painful but is given in love to restore His child to know and live out that which is true and right.

To “turn a sinner from the error of his way” is thus to bring that person back to the truth and to embrace the truth in his or her life and actions. The English word “turn” translates the Greek ἐπιστρέφω (*epistrephō*) which means “to turn back” or “to turn around,” that is, to reverse the errant path upon which the person is walking and to direct that person to the “path of righteousness.”

He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. (Ps 23:3)

And it is clear that one of the primary methods the Lord uses to restore His child who has “strayed from the truth” is the loving and persistent friendship of believers within the body of Messiah. Thus, James gives the strong encouragement to us all, that when we are used of the Lord to help bring a fellow believer back to living what is right and true, we are to know that we have been used of the Lord in a very important and strategic way.

... *will save his soul from death* – Once again, it appears that James is reiterating what we find in the wisdom of the Tanach:

In the way of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death. (Prov 12:28)

The obvious truth is that a “path of life” that is not one of righteousness is, in fact, a pathway that leads to death. This is clearly referring to spiritual death, for if one who has professed to be a believer turns to live a life that is contrary to the truth of God, and never repents and turns back to the truth, then such a life of disobedience evidences a lack of

truly being born again unto a new life in Messiah and marks the person as an unbeliever. Clearly the Lord is the ultimate judge of the heart, but a person who professes to be a believer but whose life evidences no true fruit of righteousness causes their profession to be gravely suspect.

Some question why James would ascribe the “saving” to the one who has “turned the sinner from the error of his way.” The obvious answer is that those who help turn a fellow believer from the path upon which he has strayed, have been used of the Lord to bring about repentance and a return to a life of obedience. That God uses various means, including people, to accomplish His will, is clear. Note Paul’s instructions to Timothy:

Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you. (1Tim 4:16)

Paul is not ascribing saving power to Timothy himself, but to the power of teaching that is based upon the Scriptures and is thereby used of God to bring about His saving grace and mercy in the lives of those who are His.

*...and will cover a multitude of sins.* – Sin inevitably brings consequences because living in sin is contrary to God’s will and design, and life characterized by sin inevitably yields sorrow and trouble. The longer a person remains on a path that leads away from God and His righteous instructions for life, the more pain and strife will be experienced, even if this is not immediately evident to others.

The metaphor of “covering” sin is well attested in the Scriptures and it means to put sin out of sight. To have sins “covered” when considered in the realm of forgiving one another, means that the sin is not longer a dividing factor, but that true forgiveness has been given and restoration is therefore desired. When considered in terms of what God “sees,” for sins to be “covered” means that they are no longer “seen” by Him as requiring payment. The sins have been paid for and no longer require His righteous judgment.

How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit! (Ps 32:1–2)

Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions. (Prov 10:12)

Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. (1Pet 4:8)

Thus, James ends his epistle by giving a series of exhortations on how the believing community should function together in order to help one another grow in faith and in living righteously for the glory of our risen and reigning Savior, Yeshua. Not only does James emphasize the need for his readers to do what he has written, but he also instructs them to be deeply concerned to see others within the believing community do them as well.

Though the epistle ends abruptly without any salutation, it appears that particularly this final chapter compiles a number of primary exhortations that James, being born along by the Holy Spirit, desires to emphasize for his readers and for us.

He exhorts us to be faithful in that which God has given us to do, to persevere even under difficult times, to be careful about what we promise and to keep the oaths that we make, and finally, to serve each other in the community of faith and to do so in truth, guarding each other in order to strengthen our mutual faith in Yeshua.