

James 5:19-20 — Part 1 — God's Heart Towards His Wandering Sheep

Today we continue in James chapter 5:19-20, focusing on *why* we seek to restore those who have fallen away. The focus will be on God's heart towards those who have wandered away from God as we take a step back and look at the big picture of confession and repentance throughout the entire bible. We will learn that God has always been in the business of restoring broken relationships. Next week in part 2 we will learn *how* to restore a sinning brother, with the main focus being on practical considerations in different circumstances as we take a survey of the New Testament verses that talk about restoring a wayward brother (or sister).

Memory Verses:

James 1:2-4 NKJV

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Let's start today by reading:

James 5:19-20 NKJV

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, ²⁰ let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

The Big Picture—*I Am The Lord Who Heals You*

Before I start to explain the verses to you today, I want to take a step back and look at who God is, His character, and what His heart towards us is, so that we have the right motive and attitude when we seek to restore someone who is sinning back into relationship with God and men. If we don't approach the struggling brother with compassion and humility, we can do more damage than good because we can end up condemning them. It's important to know why God is so intent on bringing us wandering sheep, us backsliders, back into the fold, back into fellowship with Himself and each other. The purpose of today's message and my pray for you all is that we will gain a greater understanding of just how compassionate, gracious, merciful, patient, and loving God is towards His struggling children.

In the Old Testament we have a revelation of who God is. God described Himself to Moses as "I AM The Lord Who Heals".

Exodus 15:26 NLT

He said, "If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his sight, obeying his commands and keeping all his decrees, then I will not make you suffer any of the diseases I sent on the Egyptians; for *I am the Lord who heals you* [*Yahweh rp (ruf-far) - I Am The Lord Who Heals You*]."

The Hebrew word translated as **Heal** means: to sew together, to mend, cure, recover, be repaired, rebuild, be made whole, one skilled in medicine, healer, doctor, surgeon, and to comfort.

Keep in mind that under the Mosaic law (The Old Covenant), God's blessings to Israel were primarily physical blessings. If they were obedient, they would be physically blessed, which included good health, protection from enemies, good crops, material prosperity etc. However, in the church age (or church era) we live in today, we live under the New Covenant (*Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you—Luke 22:20 NKJV*).

The difference is that under the New Covenant the church enjoys spiritual blessings (... *[God] has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ—Ephesians 1:3*). Today Christians are not kicked out of their country or plagued with drought or locusts when they are disobedient and wander away from God. Also, in contrast to living under the Old Covenant or the law, under the New Covenant material prosperity is no longer a proof of God's blessing or approval on a person's life.

Under the New Covenant, we are disciplined by God in different ways: we lose the peace of God (Philippians 4:7) and instead we become insecure. We cut ourselves off from the love of God and instead live in fear (*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear—1 John 4:18*), we cease to experience the joy of our salvation and instead experience sorrow of heart, our relationships with others suffer, and there are often other negative spiritual, emotional, mental, physiological and practical consequences. All in all, we fail to experience and enjoy many of our heavenly or spiritual blessings and suffer many serious wounds as a result of our rebellion (sin).

So for us living in the church age (or church era), we will learn today that ***I Am The Lord Who Heals You*** goes beyond physical healing and includes *God's great desire and unlimited ability to heal us of the consequences of our sin and restore us back to relationship with Himself and each other*. Remember the Hebrew word translated as **Heal** means: *to sew together, to mend, cure, recover, be repaired, rebuild, be made whole, one skilled in medicine, healer, doctor, surgeon, and to comfort*. So what does this look like for us today?

God will **heal** the broken heart who sought love, acceptance and affection in an illegitimate and/or abusive relationship. God will **repair** the damage done to a friendship broken because of gossip. God will **sew up** the broken marriage torn apart by adultery or dysfunction. God will **restore** trust in the person who compulsively lied. God will **rebuild** the abused person's broken heart, soul, and mind. God the **Surgeon** will cut out the cancer of envy and jealousy and instead give them a generous heart towards others. God will **make whole** the person who is crippled by the guilt of abortion. God provides the **cure** for someone who gossips. God **recovers** the person lost to addictions. God **comforts** those who have suffered loss. This is all a part of God's revelation of Himself as, ***I Am The Lord Who Heals You***.

Why do I Struggle? Does God Really Understand What I'm Going Through?

Like Exodus 15:26 implies, God's desire for us is to live in a place of blessing which we can only experience when we are walking with Him, submitted to and empowered by the Holy Spirit. However, we often choose to be dissatisfied with the heavenly blessings that God freely gives us. We instead seek the short term gratification and pleasure of sin—thus the struggle, we fight or war against the world, the flesh, and the devil (1 John 2:16).

However, God is merciful and He wants to heal the break in our relationship with Him and others caused by our sin. God knows that we will struggle because we still have our sinful human nature attached to us, and through Christ's substitutionary death on the cross (2 Corinthians 5:20-21) God has made a way for all (including believers who have sinned) to come back to Him—our reconciliation being accessed by confession, repentance, submission, and choosing to draw near to God, as we have learned about in James.

What is God's Heart Towards Me?

Like a loving parent, God is incredibly grieved, but not angry, when His adopted children rebel against Him. Like a loving parent, His greatest desire is for His children to “come to their senses” (like the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-31) and confess and forsake (repent of) their sins so the relationship can be healed and restored. When we do, God runs to meet us and His greatest joy is to be able to bless us again, lavishing on us His wonderful heavenly blessings once more. This is what James meant when he wrote, “draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8). We could write, “draw near to God because God earnestly desires to draw near to you”—like the Father in the parable, God is waiting and watching for His wayward, wandering, backslidden child to return home. God's heart is for you. He loves you.

One thing essential to true repentance (different to remorse) is to understand that we break God's heart when we turn away from Him.

Ezekiel 6:9 NKJV

...because I was crushed by their adulterous heart which has departed from Me.

While it is true that we do much damage to ourselves and others when we sin and reject our Abba (Daddy) Father (Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6), the greatest offence is against God—He is the One who is hurt the most. When we don't comprehend or understand that when we sin we crush God's heart we are only remorseful—we want to change only because of how our sin affects us. But true repentance happens when we understand how our sin affects God and we are truly sorry for crushing His heart when we rebel or sin against Him. It becomes all about God and not about us.

Listen to some of the promises that God has given to His wayward, wandering, and backsliding children. See how gentle and compassionate God is towards us when we fail, when we turn our backs on Him; He's like a mother holding her newborn baby—the demanding, completely selfish and crying baby can give nothing to the mother, but the mother has an unbreakable bond with her newborn—there is nothing that she wouldn't do for her child—she has unending patience. As newborn christians, we don't have much to offer God because we are still so selfish, but as we grow and mature, we become more able to enjoy a close love relationship with our Abba (Daddy) Father.

Psalms 30:2-5 NKJV

² O Lord my God, I cried out to You,

And You healed me.

³ O Lord, You brought my soul up from the grave;

You have kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit.

⁴ Sing praise to the Lord, you saints of His,

And give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name.

**⁵ For His anger is but for a moment,
His favour is for life;
Weeping may endure for a night,
But joy comes in the morning.**

God disciplines those He loves (Hebrews 12:1-11), and it is always for our eternal good. If we submit to God's discipline, there will always be **joy in the morning**.

Psalm 103:8-14 NLT

⁸ The Lord is compassionate and merciful,
slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.

⁹ He will not constantly accuse us,
nor remain angry forever.

¹⁰ He does not punish us for all our sins;
he does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve.

¹¹ For his unfailing love toward those who fear him
is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth.

¹² He has removed our sins as far from us
as the east is from the west.

¹³ **The Lord is like a father to his children,
tender and compassionate to those who fear him.**

¹⁴ **For he knows how weak we are;
he remembers we are only dust.**

Psalm 147:3 NLT

**He heals the brokenhearted
and bandages their wounds [lit. sorrows].**

God is so gracious in how He continues to heal us of our (usually) self-inflicted wounds. *God knows that we fail because we are frail. God knows that we go bust because we are only made of dust.* This doesn't excuse us for our sin, however. Instead it is a very painful lesson that we all must learn—by ourselves or without God we can do nothing (John 15:5). Our pride and confidence in our own strength and abilities must be destroyed—we must learn to die to our self. This is what Jesus meant when He *“said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me”* (Matthew 16:24). Otherwise we will not learn to depend upon God and the limitless resources that He has already made available to us by His Holy Spirit living inside of us. Remember that God has already given every believer *everything they need to live a godly life* (see 2 Peter 1:2-9). Our responsibility is to respond to God's promises.

The Consequences of Wandering From God (Backsliding)

Probably the verse that sums it up the best is:

Proverbs 14:14 NKJV

The backslider in heart will be filled with his own ways,
But a good man will be satisfied from above.

When we choose to follow God, submit to God, and obey God being motivated by His love for us, we **will be satisfied from above**. We begin to experience *complete and eternal satisfaction and contentment*—“You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11 NKJV). Remember that what God gives us the world cannot take away. We are safe and secure in our relationship with God (see John 10:28-29).

However if, like Adam and Eve in the garden when they ate the forbidden fruit, we seek to find fulfilment and pleasure outside of God’s will, then we will **be filled with our own ways**. Like Adam and Eve experienced, the passing pleasure of sin will give way to broken relationships, blame, disgrace, shame, guilt, sorrow, and much needless or unnecessary pain. We see the same message repeated in:

Jeremiah 2:19 NLT

Your wickedness will bring its own punishment.

Your turning from me will shame you.

You will see what an evil, bitter thing it is
to abandon the Lord your God and not to fear him.

I, the Lord, the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, have spoken!

Most of the time God’s discipline is nothing more than Him allowing us to experience the natural consequences of our sinful, selfish choices.

The Solution to Wandering Away from God

Listen to the key words in the following Old Testament passages. The truth we have learned about confession, repentance, submission, dependance and drawing near to God in James are not a new concepts. The solution to backsliding or wandering away hasn’t changed since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. If you are in a place where you have rebelled against God, these verses give you some great repentance prayers that you can pray and meditate on. The first one is the simplest and easiest.

Psalm 41:4 NKJV

I said, “**Lord, be merciful to me;**

Heal my soul, for I have sinned against You.”

Here **heal** refers to the forgiveness of sins and restoration of our relationship with God. This should remind us of James 5:16, “*Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*”

An important element of true or genuine confession and repentance is the understanding that **we will never deserve God’s forgiveness, mercy, and grace**. That’s why we pray, “**Lord, be merciful to me.**” This sounds like the prayer of the humble and repentant tax collector in Luke 18:13, “*And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’*”

There are many more prayers of repentance in the bible, here are just a few:

Jeremiah 3:12-13 NLT

Therefore, go and give this message to Israel. This is what the Lord says:

“O Israel, my faithless people,
come home to Me again,
for **I am merciful.**

I will not be angry with you forever.

¹³ Only **acknowledge your guilt.**

Admit that you rebelled against the Lord your God
and committed adultery against him
by worshiping idols under every green tree.

Confess that you refused to listen to my voice.

I, the Lord, have spoken!

Notice here that we must acknowledge that we have sinned against God, even if our sin was directed towards another person. David’s prayer of confession after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered Uriah her husband was, “Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight” (Psalm 51:4)

Another important element or part of our confession is **our submission to Christ’s lordship over our lives.** This is made clear in:

Jeremiah 3:22 NKJV

[God says] “**Return**, you backsliding children,
And I will **heal** your backslidings.”

[The people respond with submission] “Indeed we do come to You,
For You are the **Lord [Master]** our God.

In the book of Hosea we see another important element of true repentance—**dependance on God alone.** We must be willing to admit that our human resources and strength cannot save us or help us, and, it is precisely because we relied on our own strength and resources that we ended up in the mess we are in—see verse 3.

Hosea 14:1-4 NLT

¹ **Return**, O Israel, to the Lord your God,
for **your sins have brought you down.**

² Bring your **confessions**, and **return** to the Lord.

[If you] Say to Him,

“Forgive all our sins and **graciously** receive us,
so that we may **offer you our praises.**

³ **Assyria cannot save us,**
nor can our warhorses.

Never again will we say to the idols we have made,
‘You are our gods.’

No, in you alone
do the orphans find mercy.”

⁴ **[Then] The Lord says [promises],**
“**Then I will heal you of your faithlessness;**
my love will know no bounds,
for my anger will be gone forever.

There are also other wonderful promises here in Hosea. If we are willing to confess and humbly admit our dependence on God, then God will be faithful to heal us; *“Then I will heal you of your faithlessness.”* It sounds like 1 John 1:9. Then it gets even better with **“My love will know no bounds, for my anger will be gone forever.”** This sounds like Romans 5:20, *“But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.”* You see God hasn’t changed. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Only God has the supernatural ability to literally choose not to remember our sins (Jeremiah 31:34). When God forgives He forgets—He will never remind us of that sin again; His **anger will be gone forever**—God doesn’t hold grudges (*that means that if we are reminded of a previously confessed forgiven sin, it is satan trying to condemn us*).

The following verses are some of my favourites; they really reveal God’s heart and the people’s correct response to God.

Jeremiah 3:19-25 NLT

**“I thought to myself,
‘I would love to treat you as my own children!’
I wanted nothing more than to give you this beautiful land—
the finest possession in the world.
I looked forward to your calling me ‘Father,’
and I wanted you never to turn from me.**

²⁰ But you have been unfaithful to me, you people of Israel!
You have been like a faithless wife who leaves her husband.
I, the Lord, have spoken.”

²¹ Voices are heard high on the windswept mountains,
the weeping and pleading of Israel’s people.
For they have chosen crooked paths
and have forgotten the Lord their God.

²² **“My wayward children,” says the Lord,
“come back to me, and I will heal your wayward hearts.”**
**“Yes, we’re coming,” the people reply,
“for you are the Lord our God.**

²³ Our worship of idols on the hills
and our religious orgies on the mountains
are a delusion.

Only in the Lord our God
will Israel ever find salvation.

²⁴ From childhood we have watched
as everything our ancestors worked for—
their flocks and herds, their sons and daughters—
was squandered on a delusion.

²⁵ Let us now lie down in shame
and cover ourselves with dishonour,
for we and our ancestors have sinned
against the Lord our God.

From our childhood to this day
we have never obeyed him.”

To Summarise God's heart towards us:

1. **God is merciful:** God delights to forgive (Jeremiah 3:12)
2. **God desires and promises to heal our unfaithfulness** (Hosea 14:4)
3. **God's love knows no bounds:** there is no sin too great that God can't forgive (Hosea 14:4)
4. **God's anger is gone forever**—God chooses to forget forgiven sins and there is no more condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus (Hosea 14:4, Romans 8:1)
5. **God's heart to His faithless people is, "come home to Me again"** (Jeremiah 3:12)
6. **Our Heavenly Father understands our weakness and is tender and compassionate towards us** (Psalm 103:13-14)
7. **God's desire is to bless His children:** "'I thought to myself, 'I would love to treat you as my own children!' I wanted nothing more than to give you this beautiful land — the finest possession in the world'" (Jeremiah 3:19)
8. **God desires relationship with us:** "I looked forward to your calling me 'Father,' and I wanted you never to turn from me" (Jeremiah 3:19).

To summarise the characteristics of true confession and repentance:

1. **We must ask for forgiveness:** "Bring your confessions, and return to the Lord. Say to Him..." This means we must be willing to humble ourselves. (Hosea 14:2, Matthew 5:3)
2. **We will be broken hearted over our sin:** we will be mourning over our sin (Psalm 147:3, Matthew 5:4, Isaiah 57:15)
3. **We must always remember that we will never deserve forgiveness and restoration back into right relationship with God:** it is all grace (Hosea 14:2, Ephesians 2:8-9)
4. **We must recognise our complete dependance on God:** we must be led and empowered by the Spirit—"Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' Says the Lord of hosts." (Hosea 14:3, Zechariah 4:6)
5. **We will praise God for His abundant love, grace and mercy** (Hosea 14:2)
6. **We come fully submitted to God's lordship over our lives** (Jeremiah 3:22)
7. **We recognise that our sin is against God and God alone:** God is crushed by our adulterous heart—our sin hurts God the most (Psalm 41:4, 51:4, Ezekiel 6:9)

Other passages to meditate on that relate to confession of sin and returning to God are: Isaiah 57:15-21 and Jeremiah 3:19-4:2, Hosea 14:1-9.

Communion

Submit to God, resist the devil and he will flee from you. If God is controlling you then the devil isn't.

If we are to be fit for God's service (2 Timothy 2:21) we must remember all that Jesus has done for us and the love He has for us. We must be compelled or motivated by the love of Christ. Only if we understand then will we willingly submit to God's lordship over our lives. The more we understand the depth of God's love for us (Romans 5:8), the more we will be willing to submit and obey. That's why we always come back to the cross, God's ultimate demonstration of unconditional agape love.

2 Corinthians 5:14 NKJV

For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; ¹⁵ and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.