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## Road Trip! Great Journeys in the Bible IX. Go After Them

James 5:19-20 The Message My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God's truth, don't write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God.

Did you cringe a little as Chris read our scripture for the morning, the latest in our summer sermon "road trip" series about great journeys in the Bible? The Apostle James' instructions, though, are pretty clear: Some folks have wandered from "God's truth" and your job is confront them with that, and not "write them off." In fact, he says it more strongly: it's your job to "go after them." Cringing yet? I don't know about you, but I am reminded of those folks who accost you at airports wanting to give you their tracts and pamphlets. I'm reminded about those earnest folks who ring your doorbell and want to tell you about their religion. (Our daughter Katie had a pretty good way of dealing with those folks; she was invariably polite but always told those doorstep callers that "Yes, we are Christian; in fact both my father AND my mother are ministers." That usually ended the conversation). I'm reminded of those folks in my long-ago college days who would accost you as you walked across campus, wanting to tell you about the "Four Spiritual Laws."

We don't want to be like those folks, do we? We tend to think that a person's religion is a private, personal matter that is – to put it bluntly – none of our business. It's been my observation that particularly in the western part of the United States, there is an extremely high value put on privacy and leaving folks to themselves as long as they aren't hurting other folks – even when we think they are hurting themselves! We don't want to be pushy, we don't want to be thought of as arrogant, we would prefer to "live and let live." And so, James' words do indeed make us cringe a little. We want to

say to him, “Uh, what are my other options?”

Let’s recall what we know about James and about the era and the context in which he was writing. If you know anything about the Book of James at all, it’s probably his most famous phrase, “Faith without works is dead.” The context for his exhortation to such works, as I explained in my session with the Chapel Sunday School Class a few weeks ago, was a split in emphasis that developed very early on in the life of the Church. You see, throughout the New Testament you can trace two emphases: on the one hand, that being truly Christian is a matter of having the “right” beliefs, or, on the other hand, being truly Christian is a matter of doing the “right” things. Put another way, from the earliest years of the Church and even down to this day, some folks emphasized **believing** *in* Jesus while other folks emphasized **following** Jesus and doing the sorts of things He did. James is squarely in the second camp and his little letter in the New Testament is full of blasts at those folks who he says think that to be Christian means only that they have to believe correctly.

And so for James, the biggest problem with having what he calls “wrong beliefs” is not that God is somehow going to damn you for them, but that they lead to wrong or insufficient actions that don’t truly follow and emulate the ways of Jesus. It is those “wrong” beliefs that cause folks to, as he says, “wander away from God,” and he fears the “destruction” of those lives not so much in terms of what God is going to do to them for their wrongful beliefs but for how their lives are so much less than they could be when they get seduced by portraits of God which are hateful and hurtful. Beliefs matter to James because they lead to action and folks who have baleful beliefs end up hurting themselves and not knowing the way that God loves and cares for them and for every person God has made.

Do you begin to see the connection between James’ context and our context? At a meeting the other night our own Jon Boring said something powerfully true. Listen

to his words:

Out in the world, and especially in social media, there are a lot of folks today who think the word Christian is a synonym for stupid, insensitive, bigoted or judgmental. The label of “Christian” is something I feel compelled to defend, and to show them through Christ's love that they are incorrect in labeling us that way.<sup>1</sup>

I can't help but think that the Apostle James would have applauded both Jon's description of the problem and his solution, his own sense of compulsion to, in James' words, “go after them” and show them why they are incorrect in their labeling.

And moreover, we must sadly admit that those whom Jon is talking about have a lot of evidence to point to for thinking that the label “Christian” means, in his words, “stupid, insensitive, bigoted or judgmental.” For example,

- I've shared with you before the news reports about the huge drop in folks, especially among 20- and 30-somethings, who call themselves Christians and who specifically cite the fact that “the Church” spends too much time belittling and bashing on gays.
- When folks see those who call themselves Christian post false and even slanderous things on their Facebook pages about Christian leaders like the President, they have reason indeed to see Christians as judgmental and mean-spirited and not particularly concerned about truth.
- When it is those who label themselves as Christians who lead the charge against the teaching of science in the public schools then you can understand why those watching who understand the distinction between science and religion might think the word “Christian” means dim-witted.

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Boring, remarks at the meeting of First Christian Church's “Vision Tune-Up Team,” August 12, 2015, and then clarified via email.

I suspect you could add your own examples where seeing someone identified by the label “Christian” makes you want to say “That’s not what Christian means!!” I recall a conversation on an airplane where my seatmate, upon learning that I was a minister, said “I don’t believe in God.” My response was “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.” After he then shared some of the things that he’d heard some Christians say about God as the reason he didn’t believe, I said to him “I don’t believe in that God either.”

Yes, James is right: misunderstandings of God are all around us, and misrepresentations of Christianity are everywhere. So what shall we do? Because if that is James’ diagnosis, his prescription – “go after them and get them back” – seems to land us right back where we started, with our reluctance to invade folks’ privacy and our wanting to respect individual belief. And yet, here’s the thing: those beliefs that these folks hold about God and about Christians and about the Church can make their lives less full, less lovely, less purposive than they could be. Those who think that God is a tyrant just waiting to punish them live lives that are more fearful than they need to be. Those who think that God decides to send tragedy to some and blessing to others will live their lives seeking to placate that God, not, as the hymn says, “lost in wonder, love, and praise.” So, yes, James is right, but how do we “go after” these folks and help change their hearts and their minds and let them know what we know about a God of unconditional love and a Church that seeks – imperfectly to be sure – to reflect and live out that love through the mandate of radical hospitality?

Well, I am going to give you two small concrete suggestions for how you can respond to James’ mandate to “go after” such folks. You don’t have to go down and join our street-preaching friend on the corner of Pikes Peak and Tejon. You don’t have to be aggressive, rude or judgmental. But these two simple things might perhaps be the things that shows someone else that Christians are not, in fact, to use Jon Boring’s

words again, “stupid, insensitive, bigoted or judgmental” and that the God that they worship is a God of grace not a God of joyless judgmentalism.

Before I do that, though, let me offer an aside about this whole business of “judging” folks.<sup>2</sup> Some people think to not judge means to never, ever count this idea or practice morally better or worse than that one. *But that cannot be what it means if we are to be Christian. We **have to** be able to make judgments. Without impugning any particular person, we **have to** be able to judge that there is something deeply wrong about a criminal justice system that is institutionally biased against young African Americans. We **have to** be able to judge that when Isis beheads journalists, applauds throwing acid in the face of young girls who want to go to school, and teaches rape of twelve year olds as a training tool for its “soldiers” that these things are morally vile. The furthest thing from Christianity is that terrible modern notion that everyone’s opinions are equally valid and that none should be judged as any better or any worse than others. No, what we can say is this: there is a difference between **judgmentalism** and **principled judgment**. And the difference depends on knowing the truth about God. *Judgmentalism* mirrors a mistaken understanding of God that says that God hates certain people simply because of who they are or what they believe. But *principled judgment* knows that God is a God of unconditional love who therefore doesn’t hate people, but sometimes, indeed, hates what they do or the beliefs that they hold because those actions and those beliefs hurt people. God weeps over the deluded folks who cross the ocean to join Isis and are taught to murder and maim; God, I believe, finds such things vile and odious and reprehensible. God weeps over young African American lives lost because of just how internalized institutional racism is, and finds the actions of too many who are steeped in such a system to be wrong and*

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<sup>2</sup>I’m once again grateful to Jon Boring for the impetus for this paragraph; private email correspondence August 14, 2015.

reprehensible. *But God does not hate the people themselves.* If we know nothing else, if we affirm nothing else, it is that our faith is in a God, a Savior, whose love can be stronger than any hate and that repentance is possible for anyone. To deny that means that we are saying that there are things that are stronger than God, and that I will not say.

So, you **have to** judge, you **ought** to judge. But you ought not be **judgmental**. You **have** to judge, you **ought** to judge, that some people are captivated by beliefs that are wrong and therefore do things that are wrong – and that their lives would be better if they stopped believing and doing those things. But *judgmentalism* is the attitude that those people simply are not of as much value to God as you or I, and that is something that is at odds with the Savior who died for everyone – everyone – in this world.

With all of that in mind, what are those two simple steps that you can take that can, as James says, “go after” the folks under the sway of false ideas about what it means to be Christian and who God is? Well, the first is something I have asked of you before. Carry a couple of our “church member business cards” in your purse or wallet. Because you WILL run into someone who, like my seatmate on that airplane, doesn’t believe in a God that you don’t believe in either! Be alert for an opportunity to say “You might want to check out my church; we don’t understand God that way at all and we try to be people who aren’t judgmental.” You just might be the one who makes the difference in whether someone’s life continues to be hard and hurtful, under the sway of a mistaken notion of God as a tyrant.

Second, as Jon Boring pointed out, the existence of social media – Facebook, and Twitter and the like – have made it hugely more possible and hugely more visible for some folks to proclaim a false message about God and a false message about Christians and the Church. So the second simple thing I would ask of you is this. If you’re on Facebook and something comes up in your feed from someone which depicts

God as a tyrant, or which depicts Christians as being anti-science, or which nastily impugns the faith and integrity of the President or other leaders, or which says that God hates some people just for who they are or how they were created to be – at the very least, pass on by. Don't "like" it, don't forward it, don't share it, don't re-post it. Too many people see those who label themselves as Christians promoting all these things and come to the conclusion that we are not a people of love but a people who take joy in hate, and that our God is one who also is about hating people.

But that's not so, is it? James tells us to "go after" those folks who think so because of what it does to their lives and how their mistaken beliefs can hurt them and this world. "Go after them" because Jesus delights in folks who come to know the joy of a life lived in the arms of a God of grace. "Go after them" because, after all, you have been blessed with a God and a Church that has shown the reality of life abundant and the promise of life eternal – and why oh why wouldn't you want to share that, sing it, shout it? Why indeed!