

Search and restore: Mark 9:38-50; James 5:13-20

Perhaps Jesus is too hopeful, too optimistic about these outsiders to suit our temperament.

by [Stephen E. Fowl](#) in the [September 19, 2006](#) issue

If you are reading this column hoping to get some insight into Mark 9:49-50, you can stop now. These verses are intensely obscure; the commentaries offer little help; neither I nor anyone I know has received a special revelation explaining the text. Let us simply agree to move on to other matters.

By this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus has started to speak openly about his impending death. He is moving inexorably toward Jerusalem; he has urged those who want to follow him to pick up their crosses and get moving. Exacting, unswerving discipleship seems to be what is needed most urgently. There is a mounting sense of expectation and tension surrounding Jesus' next moves. Despite all of this, Jesus displays great generosity toward those at the fringes of his band of disciples, those who work powerfully in Jesus' name but have not yet adopted the standard ways of affiliating with him. He seems eager to include these people among his band and he expects his followers to do likewise.

If, to use one of Jesus' own analogies, the coming of the kingdom is like the start of a grand dinner party, then Jesus wants his followers to be like gracious hosts welcoming the guests. Of course, the best hosts draw their guests into a group and out of themselves, forming a sort of community. Jesus also has some fairly harsh warnings for those among his more established followers who set up roadblocks or checkpoints for "these little ones who believe in me."

Jesus neither needs nor wants bouncers guarding the door to the grand feast he is initiating. Nevertheless, Jesus is not blurring the lines between believers and unbelievers. Rather, he displays and commands a generous openness to those who believe in him and are doing powerful deeds in his name, yet for reasons undefined have not joined the main body of disciples.

Perhaps Jesus is too hopeful, too optimistic about these outsiders to suit our temperament. For in our most public gestures and pronouncements Christians in this country rarely display this sort of generosity toward each other. The desires to exclude and separate generally overwhelm the desire to draw in.

Such an observation is typically countered by the claim that rather than excluding and separating from their brothers and sisters, these believers are simply addressing the overt and insufficiently acknowledged sinfulness of the church. In the face of similar failings among his followers, Jesus himself is neither indifferent nor silent.

This seems to be a valid point. In the final words of his epistle James has something to say about this. Those who have read this far in James know that he is hardly soft on sin. James outlines both the sources and motives of strife among believers. He has unequivocally asserted the interconnection between Christian believing and Christian practice. He has castigated the rich, the verbose, the hypocrites and the self-sufficient, who seek to conduct their affairs outside the scope of God's providential care. It is as if James prophetically anticipated the advent of the modern wealthy theology professor.

It is abundantly clear to me that having expertly probed all of my own most deep-seated sins, James is hardly indifferent to believers' tendencies to wander into sin. It is important to recognize, though, that he is not eager to exclude believers when they do wander into sin. Rather, the final (and most important) task for believers is to bring back those who wander into sin. This is the perfect complement to the generosity displayed by Jesus in the reading from Mark. The aim of Jesus' generosity toward those on the margins of the group seems to be to draw them in closer. Once drawn by the generosity of Jesus inside the circle of disciples, believers must not allow each other to wander away.

James will not let believers write each other off. We cannot be indifferent to either our own sin or the sin of others. Further, James calls us to display a profound level of compassion for our sisters and brothers in Christ. Should believers wander into any of the sins James has incisively analyzed in the body of his letter, it falls to their sisters and brothers to seek them out and turn them around. Indeed, James suggests that absent our seeking them out, the salvation of the wandering brother or sister is at stake. The degree to which James imagines believers to be dependent upon each other is staggering. Nevertheless, success in this venture "will cover a multitude of

sins.”

As with the generosity displayed by Jesus, the compassion James desires believers to show to each other stands in sharp contrast to the ways contemporary Christians typically behave toward each other in public. It is much more common to see believers separating themselves from each other because of real or perceived sinfulness. Smug indifference and indignant divisiveness are far more common than compassionate pursuit of our brothers and sisters.

Does James really mean for our pursuit of sinful brothers and sisters to persist indefinitely? Surely there must be some end point. There must be some point at which compassion must give way in the face of a willed refusal to return from one's wanderings. James, who in so many respects offers pragmatic Christian wisdom, gives no answer to such a question. His final words throw us into a situation in which the state of our souls depends on the compassion of our fellow believers, who seek us out when we wander into sin and restore us to fellowship, covering a multitude of sins.