

## JAMES 4:17

### SINS OF OMISSION

”Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”<sup>1</sup>

**I**t is one thing to be ignorant of what is expected and thus offend; it is quite another thing to know what is right and yet fail to do it. We evangelical Christians are familiar with the “thou shalt not’s” that are seemingly held as a sacred trust by our various denominations. However, we evangelicals are less fussy about making ourselves aware of the “thou shalt’s.” Consequently, whilst we are quick to tell others the things we don’t do, it seems that we deserve a failing grade on fulfilling the positive commands of God’s Word. This situation has prevailed historically among our churches, though it would seem that even the “thou shalt not’s” are being increasingly ignored within contemporary Christendom.

I am not suggesting that we should depreciate the negative commands of our Faith; I am, however, suggesting that we need to understand the positive commands of our Faith and recognise the consequences of failure to implement these various responsibilities in our lives. James succinctly confronts all Christians with a systematic failure to avoid sin by doing what is right when he writes, “Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” His stinging words will prove beneficial for each of us to contemplate.

**MOVING FROM THE SPECIFIC TO THE GENERAL** — Reviewing the instructions James has provided to this point, you will recall that he has been quite specific. “Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil... Draw near to God... Cleanse your hands ... Purify your hearts... Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord” [**JAMES 4:7-10**]. “Do not speak evil against one another” [**JAMES 4:11**]. However, James’ admonitions now become general.

The transition is startling, abrupt, without warning after being so particular in verse 16. For this reason, some scholars become almost dismissive of this particular verse in their comments on his letter. They imagine that James is loosely citing a proverb or that he is quoting a saying that was commonly recited by the people of that day. Consequently, they wonder if his words have any immediate application in this instance.

I am convinced that James’ words are vital to a wholesome, well-rounded life for Christians. Consequently, while it is evident that he indeed makes a generalised statement, that statement presents an essential principle for a life pleasing to God. Underscore in your mind that James has provided a concise proverb to guide our lives. We do well to memorise the principle. “Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”

**NECESSARY INFORMATION** — If we will make sense of this verse, there are a couple of issues that should be established. First, to whom does this verse apply—to outsiders, or to Christians. Secondly, it will be beneficial for us to explore the consequences of sin. We should have some understanding of the consequences of our actions, and that means that we must understand how God reacts to sin in the life of His child. In short, will God disown His child when that child sins? Or does God ignore sin in His child?

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I am certain that the verse before us this day is written for Christians; James is not admonishing sinners to believe. Throughout the letter, he confronts fellow Christians who are under siege by inhabitants of an unbelieving world. Having grown weary of the need to defend themselves constantly, these Christians were beginning to accommodate the world—their actions were increasingly indistinguishable from the actions of earth dwellers. These saints were trying to find a way to lessen the pressure on their lives through deflecting attention because of their strange lifestyle. It was a problem that other biblical writers addressed. Certainly, Peter was concerned that those reading his letters were steadfast in the face of opposition. Paul, also, was deeply concerned that those to whom he wrote not only professed Christ, but that they exhibited the transformation that He must bring to one's life.

The reason I am confident that this verse is written for Christians who are tempted to deviate from the path of righteousness lies in the tenor of the letter. Throughout, James has confronted us who name the Name of Christ. First, he encouraged us to remain firm in the tests that are certain to come into the life of each Christian; and he urged us not simply to hear the Word, but to do the Word. He rebuked us Christians for expressing prejudice against others who come into the Faith, insisting that we were responsible to treat one another with dignity. He confronted our persistent tendency to accept profession for possession; and he confronted the all too human characteristic of destroying fellow believers with our tongue. He reminded readers of the necessity of heavenly wisdom even while urging us to eschew worldly wisdom; and throughout the chapter before us, he has argued against the tendency to live as the world lives.

There is another good reason for understanding this verse as applicable to Christians. Outsiders, those who are lost and unsaved, cannot know the will of God because they have never obeyed the first command of God to believe His Son. The Word of God is quite pointed in exposing the inability of the lost to please God. The Wise Man has written:

“The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD;  
how much more when he brings it with evil intent.”

[PROVERBS 21:27].

If you imagine that Solomon's words are pointed, what will you say of John's commentary on Jesus? “Whoever believes in [the Son of God] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the Name of the Only Son of God.” Later, the Evangelist makes the case stronger still when he writes, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” [JOHN 3:18, 36].

You will recall that the Master testified, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” [JOHN 8:12]. Jesus also confessed, “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in Me may not remain in darkness” [JOHN 12:46]. There is yet another testimony that is necessary for understanding this particular issue before us now. John has written, “If we say we have fellowship with [the Master] while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practise the truth” [1 JOHN 1:6]. Of unbelievers, Paul has written, “The god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” [2 CORINTHIANS 4:4]. Of Christians, the Apostle has also written, “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” [2 CORINTHIANS 4:6].

Unbelievers are in darkness; they have no light because they have never received the light of Christ the Lord. Practically speaking, an outsider cannot recognise what is right; he resents the instruction of righteousness because it condemns his own actions and even his tendencies. An outsider may perform correct actions, but because she has motives that are displeasing to God, her actions cannot honour Him. Outsiders may say prayers, but they cannot pray. Outsiders may perform liturgies, but they cannot worship. Outsiders may be ever so religious, but they cannot please God.

Since the verse is written to Christians, we should determine the context. To this point, James has been pointing to specific actions that are displeasing before the Master. Before this verse, James has raised the issue of whether we *know* God's will. With this verse, he shifts to asking whether we *do* God's will. James is carrying the issue of faith into the realm of active obedience. If we know God's will, then we are expected to do God's will. There is no excuse for sinning by default.

Implicit in James' words is the fact that we Christians are responsible to know the will of God. We have the Spirit of God living within us. He is the Helper appointed to "teach [us] all things and bring to [our remembrance all that [the Master] has said" [JOHN 14:26]. As we move about in our lives, the Spirit of God is constantly directing us, saying, "This is the way, walk in it" [ISAIAH 30:21]. James has already informed us that "the Spirit God caused to live within us has an envious yearning" for us to do what is pleasing to Him [JAMES 4:5 NET BIBLE].

More than that, according to Peter, "we have something more sure" than even experience, and that is "the prophetic Word" [2 PETER 1:19]. Frankly, there is no excuse for a child of God living in Canada to claim ignorance of the Word. We have multiplied translations of God's Word in our own language. Radio and television and internet disseminate the Word so that it is almost impossible to believe that someone can exist without hearing the preached Word. If there is a deficit of opportunity to know the will of God, it lies in the failure of us who are preachers to provide sound teaching.

As an aside of considerable importance, preachers bear an awesome responsibility to declare the Word of the Lord faithfully. They are responsible to know the Word and to rightly handle that Word. I fear that many who are looked to as preachers in this day are more like religious cheerleaders than they are expositors of the Word. Listening to much that masquerades as preaching in this day can produce spiritual dyspepsia at best and ensure spiritual malnutrition at worst. Preachers are trained to build self-esteem, to make people feel good about themselves, to avoid confronting sinners in their sin. Thus, contemporary preachers willingly tell a story about a lost dog that generates a few tears, and people feel as though they have worshipped. Or they tell about a book of pop psychology that can remove feelings of guilt, and people are thrilled to imagine that they are pleasing to the Lord. However, the people of God are responsible to know the will of God, and we who are appointed to the sacred desk are responsible to ensure that we faithfully declare the full will of God.

Now, James says that if we know the will of God, we are responsible to do the will of God. According to James' teaching to this point, (teaching for which we cannot claim ignorance):

- When we refuse to accept testing permitted by God, *we sin*.
- When we fail to ask for heavenly wisdom, or fail to appropriate that wisdom, *we sin*.
- When we succumb to temptation, *we sin*.
- When we fail to hear the Word, *we sin*.

- When we refuse to bridle our tongue, *we sin*.
- When we treat fellow Christians as inferior to ourselves, *we sin*.
- When we reduce the Faith to ritual, *we sin*.
- When we destroy with our tongue, *we sin*.
- When we quarrel and fight, *we sin*.
- When we speak evil of fellow Christians, *we sin*.
- When we exalt ourselves, *we sin*.

Though we are prone to treat sin lightly, sin is an offence to Holy God. The redeemed child of God is not lost because he or she sins; however, sin does cause fellowship to be broken. It is not that God ceases to love His child; but our sin comes between us and God. Nevertheless, God offers eternal life, and the child of God, having been saved, cannot suddenly be unsaved. Perhaps the best-known verse in the entire Bible is **JOHN 3:16**: “God so loved the world, that He gave His Only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

In years past I have often drawn comfort from Jesus’ Words recorded in **JOHN 10:28-30**. “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” God offers to all people eternal life and not provisional life.

Though the child of God, having been saved, cannot be lost, that child can be estranged and experience the loss of fellowship. The prophets of Israel confronted sin and spoke directly to God’s people as sinful. Listen to Isaiah as he rebukes the people for their sin.

“Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save,  
or His ear dull, that it cannot hear;  
but your iniquities have made a separation  
between you and your God,  
and your sins have hidden His face from you  
so that He does not hear.”

[ISAIAH 59:1, 2]

Jeremiah makes a similar observation when he says, “Your sins have kept good from you” [**JEREMIAH 5:25**].

Having sinned, the child of God is also subject to discipline. God will not ignore sin in His children. The Father does not disown us because we sin. On the authority of His Word, we discover that the Father loves His children too much to permit them to destroy their lives through sinning. Just as a mother who loves her child will not permit her child’s rebellion to destroy her love for that child, so God will not permit our wickedness to destroy His love for us as His child. This subject is covered extensively and in pointed fashion in the Letter to Hebrew Christians. “Have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,  
nor be weary when reproved by him.  
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,  
and chastises every son whom he receives.’

“It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” [HEBREWS 12:5-11].

Establish in your mind that the verse before us is directed to Christians. The verse is directly applicable to most of us listening to this message; we need to take it to heart. As Christians, God holds us accountable to do what we know to be right, not ignoring His command and attempting to claim that we have not sinned because we took no action. It is an awful sin to avoid doing what is courageous and right because such action may jeopardise our comfort.

I still remember the shock I experienced the first time I read JEREMIAH 48:10: “Cursed is he who does the work of the LORD with slackness.” The stunning denunciation echoes Deborah’s words recited in the song she sang after Barak defeated Sisera.

“Curse Meroz, says the angel of the LORD,  
curse its inhabitants thoroughly,  
because they did not come to the help of the LORD,  
to the help of the Lord against the Mighty.”

[JUDGES 5:23]

It is evident that God does not value the attitude that condones slackness. That condemnation anticipates a searing censure that occurs near the end of the written Word. John, writing of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, faithfully records the testimony of the Risen Saviour who said, “As for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death” [REVELATION 21:8]. Those who avoid doing what is right because of fear, or through unwillingness to inconvenience themselves, are in a perilous position. By their actions, such individuals deny a vital relationship to the Saviour.

**ESSENTIAL COMMANDS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT** — There are 613 positive commands in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, there are more than 1,050 commands that are written. Many of these commands are applicable in narrowly defined situations, but there are some commands that we must not ignore. Though any command of God must be considered as important, some of His commands are absolutely essential in order to enjoy a viable relationship with Holy God.

To be certain, God “now commands all people everywhere to repent” [ACTS 17:30]. I would be remiss were I to fail to remind all who listen that God calls each individual to life in His Beloved Son. He does not automatically extend salvation on the basis of race or nationality or culture or privilege. No mortal deserves His grace, but it is freely extended to any who are willing to receive it. Therefore, we are responsible to respond to His offer when it is extended. Thus, Paul testifies, “Working together with God, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says,

“‘In a favourable time I listened to you,  
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’

“Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” [2 CORINTHIANS 6:1, 2].

The command to love God grows out of the commandment that the Master identified as “the most important” of all commandments [MARK 12:29]. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your souls and with all your mind and with all your strength” [MARK 12:30]. From this, I learn that all the commandments of the Bible are not equal; God evidently discriminates between commands, some being of greater importance than others. Loving God in this manner leads us to seek a vital, living relationship with Him.

Jesus did not stop with designating the great and first command, but He continued by identifying a second command which He identified as being akin to this great and first commandment. That second commandment states, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” [MATTHEW 22:39]. Of these two commandments, the Master said that they were foundational for all the Law and the Prophets. According to the Master, all that is written in the Law and the Prophets is based on these two commandments. The first is essential if we will be saved, for it will lead us to seek God’s mercy so that we may please Him. The second is essential because it gives evidence that we see the grace of God at work in our lives and seek to extend that grace through reaching out to others. If we master these two commands, we will fulfil all the commands of the Old Testament, and I should imagine that all the commands of the New Covenant will be fulfilled as well.

There is an extension of this second great command that is well known to anyone familiar with the Word of God. Having received the grace of God in Christ the Lord, we have also received the command to love one another. Jesus has said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” [JOHN 13:34, 35]. Listen, as again the Master iterates this vital command to all who are called by His Name.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another” [JOHN 15:12-17].

There is a final command that is sadly neglected among us modern evangelicals to our detriment and to the loss of the Kingdom of God. As He was leaving this earth, Jesus gave a commandment to His disciples. The commandment is not optional, nor can we excuse our failure to obey this command. In fact, whenever the people of God have obeyed the command, the cause of Christ advanced throughout the earth. Whenever the churches of our Lord ignored the command, the advance of the Kingdom of God ceased and the churches began a retreat from vigorous Christianity. I’m speaking of the Great Commission.

Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” [MATTHEW 28:18-20].

The command, as written in Matthew's Gospel, is akin to that which Doctor Luke wrote in **ACTS 1:8**. "You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The command is iterated in Luke's Gospel where Jesus is recorded as saying, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His Name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things" [**LUKE 24:46-48**]. Can any command be clearer than this, especially as it is recorded in Mark's Gospel? "God into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" [**MARK 16:15, 16**].

We would be well on our way toward pleasing God in everything were we to memorise and live by the commands just cited in this message.

- To repent, believing the message of life in the Son of God.
- To love God with our whole being.
- To love our neighbour as ourselves.
- To love one another.
- To disciple the lost.

**APPLYING THE MESSAGE TO DAILY LIFE** — Exposition is meaningless if there is no application. The neglected practise of providing application has ensured that the modern pulpit is enervated—rendered anaemic and enfeebled. Therefore, if we will benefit from the pointed message James has provided it is essential for us to become specific, driving the point home and implementing it in each of our lives.

First, it is appropriate that we, as the people of God, familiarise ourselves with His will. This is essential if we will benefit from what James has said. As Christians, we must be aware of the will of God. Then, because we know the will of God, we must determine that we will do the will of God. This imposes responsibility on each of us from at least two areas. We must know the Word of God and we must be sensitive to heed the voice of the Spirit of God.

Knowing the Word of God is accomplished through reading the Word and through attending the teaching of the Word. The child of God is responsible to read the Word of God. Undoubtedly, it is an excellent practise to have a systematic plan for reading the Word of God. Whilst I am reluctant to impose on anyone a slavish plan of reading that is performed simply to say that it is performed, I am equally reluctant to excuse the busyness of modern lives that permits us to ignore all together the reading of God's Word. What I am saying is that I fear encouraging anyone to fall into such a routine that though they see the words written on a page they fail to hear the voice of the Risen Saviour speaking through His Word.

Though I do not anticipate that those who are of the world will be eager to hear the preaching of the Word, I am astounded at the unwillingness of those who profess to love God to delight in His Word. Amos spoke of a day that at one time seemed remote in my estimate. The prophet said,

“Behold, the days are coming,’ declares the Lord GOD,  
‘when I will send a famine on the land—  
not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,  
but of hearing the words of the LORD.’”

[**AMOS 8:11**]

Amos foresaw a day when the prophetic word would be stilled, the pulpit would be puerile and flaccid. In that day, those claiming to speak for the Lord would be more concerned about people's feelings than about honouring God. He wrote of a day when people would literally starve because of the dearth of preaching of the Word of God; and when people did seek out that Word, having found it, they would reject it. That day is upon us. Milton's words would tragically apply in far too many evangelical churches in our day.

"The hungry Sheep look up, and are not fed,  
But swoln with wind, and the rank mist they draw  
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread..."

Though the people love the ceremonies of their religion, there is no heart in it and no substance in what is delivered. However, as Amos observed, the people love it that way [see **AMOS 4:5**].

Again, as God's holy people, we must encourage one another to do what is right. We must assume responsibility for one another, not only to avoid doing what is proscribed in the Word of God, but doing all that is prescribed in that Holy Word. The author of the Letter to Hebrew Christians did not hesitate to confront sin in the lives of those to whom he wrote, but he also urged them to encourage one another. Listen to him as he urges his readers to continue strong toward the goal of pleasing the Master. "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" [**HEBREWS 10:23-25**].

I confess that I quickly tire of the demands to baby-sit colicky and infantile Christians. There is no question that I am not the gentlest of God's under shepherds. However, I recognise that God appoints those who shepherd His flock to seek out His straying sheep. The task is too great and too vital to entrust to one man; fulfilling that mandate to seek out straying sheep requires training each member of the flock to assume responsibility for one another. Consequently, I have endeavoured to impress on each congregation under my authority to love one another deeply from the heart and not to permit anyone to wander away. This is nothing less than holding one another accountable and urging one another to continue in the path of righteousness.

Lastly, I remind you that we must not presume to judge one another. Rather, we must encourage one another. James has said that "We all stumble in many ways" [**JAMES 3:2**]. Because this is true, we must be compassionate toward those who do stumble. However, just because we recognise the sinful condition of our fellow Christians, we must not ignore sin in the community of Faith. We must avoid either extreme, neither ignoring sin nor harshly condemning the sinner. Rather, we must build one another, gently encouraging one another to grow in the Faith.

Let's admit something. We who are Christians know the right thing. If we are willing to admit this, shouldn't we also admit that we often fail to do what we know is right, excusing our failure to act. Let's examine our failure from God's perspective, confessing our failure for what it is—sin. If we give our failure its proper name, we will no longer seek to excuse our lack of action. If we no longer attempt to excuse our sin, we will make great strides toward honouring God. And that is the inward desire of each of us who are children of the Living God.



Are you a Christian? Have you a heart to know and to do the will of God? Then, the message James has given resonates with you and finds lodging in your heart. If you have never known Christ as Saviour and Master, then your first need is to obey the call to repent and to believe the Good News.

Christ died because of your sin, and He was raised from the dead to declare your right with God. You need but believe this truth and receive His sacrifice as your own. The Word of God declares, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. It is with the heart one believes and is made right with God, and with the mouth that one confesses and is saved." That promise continues by appealing to the Prophet Joel, "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved"  
[ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13 author's translation].

That is our invitation to each one who is willing to receive the grace of God. Believe that Jesus died because of your sin; believe that He conquered death and rose from the grave. Receive Him as Master over your life. Do it today; do it now. Amen.