

## Do or Not Do, That is the Question

### James 4:17

St. Peter met a man at the pearly gates and asked him if he had ever done anything of particular merit. The man responded by saying he could think of one thing and told Peter that once he came upon a gang of high-testosterone bikers who were threatening a young woman. He told them to leave her alone, but they wouldn't listen so he went up to the biggest and most heavily tattooed biker, smacked him on the head, kicked over his bike, ripped out his nose ring and threw it on the ground and told him to leave her alone or he would have to answer to him. Peter was impressed and asked the guy when that happened. The man said, about a minute ago.

Our passage this morning, found in **James 4:17**, has application and bearing on all of us.

**“Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.”**

Take that and do a few mental laps around your gray matter and wrestle with what James is saying. The Phillips translation reads **“Well, remember that if a man knows what is right and fails to do it, his failure is a real sin.”**

It couldn't be any clearer. Anyone who knows what to do and doesn't do it, is sinning. As we see from James, that is a disgraceful charge to ponder.

## I. A DISGRACEFUL CHARGE TO PONDER

Notice first, the admonition is comprehensive.

### A. The Admonition Is Comprehensive

Your translation may begin with the word **“therefore”**. It's a link to what James has written in the previous verses and is a logical conclusion that suggests an if/then scenario: if this happens, then this is the result. This verse identifies his targeted audience – **“anyone”** and then identifies the reason for addressing them: they know something and then tells us what it is they know and why he is concerned and why they should be concerned as well. The phrase **“anyone who knows”** can literally read **“the person knowing how.”**

In my limited experience, and I emphasize the word limited, the couple of times I have been pulled over for speeding, the first question the officer asks is do you know how fast you were driving? I can't plead the fifth. I can't plead ignorance. I can't say that I was just going with the flow of traffic. I am guilty as charged. The speed limit is posted. I can read rather well and a person doesn't need to be a brain surgeon to understand the simple message **“Speed Limit”** followed in big, bold numbers the posted speed. **“To him who knows.”**

James includes everyone who knows in this rebuke. We're all guilty in this area. He is not speaking to one particular group of people, not to one ethnicity, not to one denomination, not to one town or state or country, not even to one time period. What he said to those in the first century, he says to every century. What he said to all of them, he says to all of us. The admonition is comprehensive, all inclusive, all encompassing.

This doesn't make me feel very comfortable. James might as well be pointing his finger at me, much like when Nathan pointed his finger at King David and said “you're the man, you've incriminated yourself.” You know.

The admonition is comprehensive, which makes the implication clear.

### B. The Implication Is Clear

**“Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.”**

In any discussion on sin, there are two terms that come up. The first term is what we call sins of commission.

#### 1. Sins of commission

Now you might think of commission in regard to an authorization to perform certain duties or tasks, or to take on certain powers, with the authority to act on behalf of someone else. A naval officer is given a commission to captain a ship. An ambassador is commissioned to act on behalf of the country he represents. When I played basketball, the coach

commissioned two players to meet with the refs before the game. They represented the coach and team out on the floor during the game.

But that's not the kind of commission we are talking about regarding sins of commission. They aren't sins we've been authorized to commit. Okay, there are instances where someone authorizes another person to commit a sin. For example, Jezebel told two witnesses to lie about Naboth.

Wayne Grudem provides this definition of sin: "any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature." The key is anything that fails to conform to the moral law of God. Culture isn't the standard of right and wrong. Government doesn't determine what is moral. Parents don't generate their own list. God does. Any act, attitude or nature that doesn't measure up to His standard is sin.

When we think about sins of commission, they are sins we take action to commit. It includes the thoughts we have, the words we speak or the deeds we do. Sins of commission can be intentional or unintentional. The issue isn't in the foreknowledge or in the planning ahead of time. If you go to England and unintentionally drive on the right side of the road when their law says you are to drive on the left side, you are still breaking the law.

The Old Testament Law included a sacrifice for sins committed unintentionally (**Numbers 15:22-24**). **Hebrews 9:7** "But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance." (or unintentionally)

When Adam and Eve sinned by eating the fruit God had forbidden, it was a sin of commission. They didn't plan it, but did it in knowledge against God's command not to eat of that tree.

**II Samuel 11** records David's sin of commission when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah. He admits his known sin in **II Samuel 12:13**.

In **Genesis 20:2** Abraham lied to King Abimelech

about his relationship with Sarah as his wife.

In **Exodus 2:11-12** Moses killed an Egyptian.

God had specifically instructed Israel not to marry foreign women who would lead them astray. It says in **Nehemiah 13:26** that Solomon had sinned by marrying many foreign women and that he sinned because of those women.

Peter cursed and lied about knowing Jesus in **Matthew 26:74-75**.

Paul confessed his intense persecution of the church in order to destroy it (**Galatians 1:13**).

The truth of the matter is that we are all guilty of committing sins of commission by acting in ways that God has forbidden and done so intentionally. We only need to read the 10 commandments to see the truth that we haven't kept them.

Have we ever been angry, jealous, envious, bitter, resentful?

Have we ever lied to a boss or parent or spouse?

Have we cheated on a test or when doing taxes?

Have we had lust in our heart or coveted something that wasn't ours?

Jesus said out of our heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander (**Matthew 15:18-19**).

The book of James identifies various sins of commission the believers were guilty of. Do any ring a bell with us?

Are we joyful in trials?

Do we ask God for things with wrong motives?

Do we give in to evil desires?

Have we tamed our tongue?

Do we obey the Word of God or merely listen to it?

Do we show favoritism?

When we read through Scripture, we have to admit that we are guilty of doing sins of commission.

But there is a second word and it's the gist of what James conveys in our text. We refer to this type of sin as sins of omission.

## 2. Sins of omission

**“Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do them, sins.”**

Where sins of commission are sins committed by doing what God’s Word says we shouldn’t, sins of omission are sins committed by not doing something we should.

**Do we love our neighbor?**

**Do we obey our parents?**

**Do we show kindness?**

**Do we forgive others?**

Paul understood and spoke of both in his letter to the Roman believers as he reflects on his life.

**Romans 7:14-20**

He did what he didn’t want to do and didn’t do what he should have done.

Got Questions lays it out clearly by saying “Here is a picture of the new creature in conflict with the flesh in which it dwells.”

Perhaps the best passage that describes the sin of omission is Jesus’s story of the Good Samaritan in **Luke 10:30-37**. Both the priest and the Levite new the right thing to do but failed to do anything while the Samaritan shows us the good we are to do by stopping to help. In the illustration, Jesus clearly showed us that not doing what is right is just as sinful as doing what is wrong.

Jesus provides us with another example in **Matthew 25:31-46**. Two groups of people are gathered around Jesus at the end times judgment. The group on His right are sheep. They are rewarded with an inheritance in heaven because they saw needs around them and provided necessary care and comfort. Let’s be clear that He’s not saying a person is granted heaven by doing good deeds, but that good deeds demonstrate your salvation.

The group on His left were goats. He denied them entrance into His kingdom because they failed to assist with the same needs even though they knew about them. These were not sins of commission. They didn’t intentionally starve or mistreat the people. They simply didn’t do anything to help them. They chose not to help.

Proverbs puts it into perspective.

**Proverbs 3:27 “Do not withhold from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act.”**

Solomon provides us with some guidance because, let’s face it, there are a lot of people who claim they have a need. He states that we shouldn’t withhold from those who deserve it. There are a lot of scammers out there who quite frankly don’t want to work when they could. Solomon is saying there are people with legitimate needs that should be helped. **James 1:27** says that the kind of religion God accepts as pure and faultless is to help orphans and widows in their needs. Secondly Solomon says we should help if we have the means to do so. We can’t meet every need, but where we are able, we must.

Several years ago on our vacation to St. Louis we pulled into a downtown parking lot to visit a museum. We no more got out of the car and was confronted by a man claiming to be homeless and looking for money to buy a meal. Initially I turned him away, but then went after him and told him I had a packed lunch I would give him. He took it and sat down on the curb to eat. A couple hours later when we returned to the car, he hit us up again. I reminded him that I had given him my lunch earlier. I was guilty of the sin of omission, but then changed my action. It’s like the son who told his dad he wouldn’t work in the field , but changed his mind.

On another vacation to D.C., we were walking by the FBI building and a man sitting on a ledge started talking to Robyn. He wanted to know where we were going. Maybe the camera around my neck tipped him off that we were tourists. Robyn told him where we headed. He told her a faster way to get there. She thought he was just being nice but then hit her up for some money. She had some granola bars and chips that she gave him.

James says if we ignore doing what we know is right, and Solomon adds if we have the means to help, we sin if we don’t.

Last week we considered whose will we are following, ours or God’s. If we tie **verse 17** with that, we avoid the sin of omission by doing the will

of God. When we choose to obey our will by not doing God's will, in this case God's will is doing what is right, by not doing it we sin. Consider again what it says in **verse 15: "if it is the Lord's will, we will do this or that."** It's a call to do God's will.

Paul said something similar in his letter to the church at Galatia. **Galatians 6:9 "Let us not become weary in doing good, for in due season we will reap if we do not faint or give up."**

Now, I want to add this thought because we have been talking as if this verse is only concerned about deeds of kindness or compassion: things like driving a neighbor to a doctor's appointment, getting groceries for a shut-in as many did this past year during the COVID lockdown. Maybe it's fixing a car for someone who can't afford to go to a shop to get the work done.

I read about a church that had a ministry where widows and single moms could bring their vehicle to the church parking lot on a designated day and mechanics in the church would change the oil and service vehicles at no cost to the car owner. They were good deeds.

There are a couple of Greek words used in the New Testament for good. One word means good in character or conduct and has to do with morality or our changed nature as believers in Christ. Our behavior changes to reflect more of Christ's character because we are a new creation.

The other word means what is good, fair, beautiful or excellent and has more to do with our deeds because of our changed character. We demonstrate love for a neighbor by doing some act of kindness for them. Where I might have become more easily impatient and irritated in a traffic jam, I am more patient and show kindness.

In the Old Testament, the two words were often combined. Who you were in nature was evident in you were in deed. The New Testament to some degree differentiates them. But again, the evidence of a character that is morally changed through the indwelling Holy Spirit is seen in how you treat or

act toward others.

Chuck Swindoll writes: "God has a standard of right living that transcends our own interests and pursuits. And He wants to guide us along the path He's set for us. To make that happen requires staying close to His Word and shaping our path according to its wisdom. But that's only half the solution. When we know what God wants from us, we need to do it. If we continue to live as though God isn't interested in certain areas of our lives, it's sin."

James uses the latter word, which refers more to deeds of kindness, but it can also clearly be taken to mean moral conduct as well. When we do what is right in character because of being a new creation in Christ, we will change in conduct both morally and in doing acts of kindness and compassion.

Walvoord and Zuck state "the letter [of James] abounds with exhortations to do good. To fail to comply is sin. To attain spiritual maturity a believer must do the good he now knows."

James says we do good by standing firmly and confidently on God's Word in trials.  
We do good by compassionately serving others without prejudicial treatment.  
We do good by speaking with a controlled tongue.  
We do good by submitting to God with humility.  
We do good by being what God wants us to be, following His will.

When we disregard the good God wants us to do, we ignore God's will out of pride. We act as though God's will is something we can take or leave, accept or reject as if the creature has the right to disobey the Creator, to be the captain of his life.

When we disregard the good God wants us to do, we can be brought under the chastening hand of God on us.

### **Hebrews 12:5-11**

Jonah is a good lesson of someone who knew the good he was to do by going to Nineveh but ignored it and ran away. God disciplined him but had no joy in going.

James gives us something disgraceful to ponder. By not doing the good God wants us to do we sin. Can you think of something this past week or past month or past year where you knew the right thing to do but didn't do it? Will you take a moment and repent of that right now? You may need to jot down some actions you need to take to make it right going forward, to do good to those who deserve it when it is in your power to help.

I don't want to leave you with pondering a charge that is disgraceful. Let's consider what Scripture has to say that would be a desirable course to pursue.

## II. A DESIRABLE COURSE TO PURSUE

### A. The Path Of Good Works Is Arranged – Ephesians 2:10 Colossians 1:10

The Ephesians passage tells us that God is working in us. We are described as being His workmanship. It means that which is made. From the Greek word we get our word poem. The word literally means work of art. We are God's poem. He continues to work in us to make us what He wants us to be. Isaiah described God as being the potter and we are the clay. As we submit to Him, He is shaping us into His image. In the beginning there are a lot of imperfections that must be removed, but the more He works and the more we yield to His work, the more we become in likeness to Him.

**Romans 8:28** says that God uses everything in the life of those who love Him for their good for the purpose, according to **verse 29** “**to be conformed to the likeness of His Son.**” To make us like Christ.

Similarly **Philippians 2:13** says that “**it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.**”

God's work in us is done primarily in three ways.

#### 1. The Word of God II Timothy 3:16-17 I Thessalonians 2:18

#### 2. Prayer Ephesians 3:20-21

#### 3. Suffering I Peter 2:20-21 I Peter 4:11-14 James 1:2-4

Warren Wiersbe writes “As we read God's Word, understand it, meditate on it, and feed on it, the Word goes to work in our lives to cleanse us and nourish us. As we pray, God's Spirit works in us to release power. And as we suffer, the Spirit of God ministers to us. Suffering drives us back to the Word and prayer, and the cycle is repeated.”

As God works in us, **Ephesians 2:10** says that He then works through us. We learned from **James 2** that saving faith always produces a changed life that is demonstrated through good works. God has good works already planned for us to do. When we are aligned with God, submit to His will, draw near to Him and delight in Him, He will show us the good deeds He has planned for us to do. We'll know they are from Him because we will do those good deeds in humility, we will find great joy in doing them and we will have peace after we are done because we did the right thing. There will be no regrets. God has arranged good works for us to do.

#### B. The Path Of Good Works Is Abounding – II Corinthians 9:8

The word abound means to overflow, to be plentiful, exist in large numbers. In **verses 6-7**, Paul says we will reap generously if we sow generously. And so as we give generously, doing so cheerfully and without reluctance or under compulsion that God loves such a heart of generosity. **Verse 8** then says God's abundant grace will give us all we need that we in turn can abound in every good work. This isn't a give a lot so you can get a lot verse. When we live in God's grace, He gives us what we need and gives us the joy to also help others.

#### C. The Path Of Good Works Is Attractive – Matthew 5:16 I Peter 2:12

When the world sees us doing good deeds God will receive the glory and people will be attracted by the

gospel we live out in what we do. Again, good deeds aren't the means of our salvation, they are the expression or evidence of our salvation.

#### **D. The Path Of Good Works Is Appropriate – Galatians 6:10**

Paul encourages us in **verse 9** not to be weary in doing good. **Verse 10** states that we should look for opportunities to help others. In essence, don't wait for something to fall in your lap, be deliberate in looking for opportunities to do good among all people and especially among God's people. Have a balance in doing good to unbelievers as well as believers. Don't be exclusive to those who believe like us, act like us, look like us and talk like us. Earlier in the letter, James told us not to discriminate or be prejudiced.

When I was in grade school, we had two black families that lived in our little Lake Orion subdivision. They were the only black kids in our elementary school. One of the houses burned down and the community came together with food, clothes, blankets and other things to help them out.

It is always appropriate to do good.

John Phillips tells about having family devotions with his children discussing **James 4:17**. He asked them what they would do if they came home from school one day and saw their mom on the couch, exhausted and not feeling well with the sink full of dirty dishes. The youngest son said, "I'd give her Geritol for iron-tired blood!"

It wasn't necessarily the right answer, but his heart was in the right place. Doing good to others is always appropriate.

#### **E. The Path Of Good Works Is Awakening – Hebrews 10:24-25**

We are exhorted to spur or encourage each other to do good works. Now that could be in deeds or in conduct, how we help others or in how we live. But sometimes the good deed we want to do is too big for one person, so we need to rally some more troops to help out. That's where we spur others on to good deeds.

One fall a few years ago, Steve and I took the teens out and did a rake and run. We went to a bunch of houses and raked up their leaves. We went to Edna Byrd's, Barb Berlin, Linda Reblin, the Savales (it was the year John had his heart attack), and we went to Florence's, but she didn't have any leaves. It was a lot of fun because we had a good number of teens helping.

Mother Theresa once said that "good works are links that form a chain of love."

When we do good works, we awaken within others a spirit to do good works as well.

#### **F. The Path Of Good Works Is Anticipated – Titus 3:1**

We need to be ready to do good works that have been prepared for us. So go out and look for them, be ready and anticipate the opportunities. They abound.

#### **G. The Path Of Good Works Is Aromatic – Hebrews 13:16**

The Message says that when we do good deeds it pleases God and describes it as an act of worship. When we don't do what is right, James says we sin. But if we do what is right as we think about our responsibility to others, it glorifies God as an act of worship that points unbelievers to Christ.

How will God use each one of us in the coming week to do good. Don't do good deeds just so we don't sin, but because we love God and it's a desirable path to pursue. Doing good is God's will.