

The Sin of Doing Nothing

In a Bible class, the teacher asked her young students, “What are sins of omission?” One student offered this explanation, “They are the sins we should have committed but didn’t.”

Unlike sins of commission, such as, adultery, murder, stealing, and idolatry, sins of omission are the sins of doing nothing. Sin is not just doing bad. Many today feel they are good simply because of an absence of bad in their lives. They are sinless in their eyes because, “I didn’t do anything wrong.” They assume they are good, simply because they have done no evil. They forget that goodness is a positive quality; not merely the absence of doing evil. Sin is more than just a transgression of the law (1 John 3:4). Sin is also a failure to do the law. “Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin” (James 4:17).

Sin can also be defined as a failure to do as you ought to do. For example, the one-talent man in Jesus’ parable did not do anything outwardly sinful. Yet, it is affirmed that he was “wicked” (Matt. 25:14ff). He could have defended himself by protesting, “Wait just a minute there. I will have you know that I am not an embezzler, I did not squander the money through riotous living like the prodigal son, in no way was I dishonest, never have I been a drunkard, murderer, fornicator or thief of any kind. I was entrusted with a talent, and it is a talent I have returned.” He was still condemned a wicked man because he failed to do as he was commanded.

R.V.G. Tasker wrote, “It is probably true to say that we more often leave undone that things we ought to have done than do the things we ought not to have done.” How often have you admitted:

- “I ought to study my Bible more.”
- “I ought to attend church services more frequently.”
- “I ought to give more.”
- “I ought to visit the sick more.”
- “I ought to do personal work.”
- “I ought to pray more.”

Who is able to say that he does all the good that he knows he should do? None! To be sinlessly perfect you would have to avoid committing any acts of sinfulness, but you would also have to perform every act commanded of you. You see, no man is sinlessly perfect.

God did not create mankind just to avoid doing bad things. He did not make it possible for us to become Christians so we could just shun evil practices. We were created in Christ to do good works (Eph. 2:10). We live the Christian life in order to do those good deeds which please God (Col. 1:10). No one persecutes us just because we do not murder and steal. Christians suffer for doing good in the name of Christ (1 Peter 3:17). By suffering persecution for doing good, we confirm and promote Christianity before the world (1 Peter. 2:13-15). God has equipped all Christians for doing good (2 Tim. 3:16,17). He rewards us for doing good (Rom. 2:6-8). Doing good as we have been commanded brings us happiness (John 13:17).

James 4:17 is a verse within a context. Note, that the term “therefore” connects this statement to the preceding context. “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit’; whereas you do not know

what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.' But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil" (James 4:13-16).

Therefore, James 4:17 expresses an axiomatic statement. If anyone omits to consider man's dependency upon God, he thus sins. Man's life is transient and fleeting. He must acknowledge the hand of God in the affairs of life.

This verse bears close comparison with other parts of the epistle. "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22). As children of God, we must always strive to be "doers of the word." If not, we sin. "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ...For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:17,26). Our faith in Christ is not demonstrated by just a refusal to do bad, but a commitment to take God at His word and respond to His commandments". Failure to do so is to sin.

Doing good is an axiom of the Old Testament as well. God condemned Israel for failing to do what was commanded. Their failure to act was rebellion (Dt. 1:26); non-belief (v. 32) caused God to be angry and punish them (vv. 34-37). The people admitted that their refusal to obey was sin (41). The scriptures insist that "all" of God's law is to be obeyed (Dt. 27:1; 12:32).

All of Jesus life "He went around doing good" (Acts 10:38). To be a Christian we must be Christ-like and go about doing good and not just avoid doing evil. In the great commission, He wants us to make disciples "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). In fact, if "you know to do good" shows that with knowledge comes responsibility. And the greater the knowledge you have the greater the responsibility. "And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more" (Lk. 12:47,48).

In fact, those who fail to do good to others will be judged as if they failed to do good for Christ. "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: 'for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25:41-46).

– Daniel R. Vess, The Forum, October 14, 2007