

Sins of Omission

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[0:00] James 4, we'll begin reading in verse 10 and read through the end of the chapter.! Please stand together with me for this reading from the Holy Word of our God.

Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will lift you up.! Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it but sitting in judgment on it. Lord, there is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you, who are you to judge your neighbor?

Now listen, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money. Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.

What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.

[1:01] As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone then who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins. Well, our text today is just one verse.

If you have your Bible open to James chapter 4, it's the last verse. I'll ask you to read it together with me. James 4, 17.

Anyone then who knows the good he ought to do but doesn't do it, sins. Now, so far, every chapter in James' book ends with a proverb, a maxim, and this chapter is no different.

This verse could stand all on its own. But the second word in the verse ties it to what has gone before. It's the word then. Anyone then or therefore.

And it causes us to look what went before. What has James just been saying? Well, he's been saying that it is not only wrong to plan without God in view, but he's been exposing the pride behind their planning.

[2:20] They make plans as if they are the masters of their own fate. And they make them without any thought of their utter need for God. They don't plan with the thought in mind, you know, it's the Lord's will that determines everything.

In fact, it determines whether I even live, much less whether my plans survive or succeed or not. So they ought to be saying, if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.

But instead, they announce their plans with such self-confidence as if they were all that was needed to pull it off. And James says, it's boasting, it's bragging, it's evil.

Now, perhaps at this point, James envisions his readers rolling their eyes and saying, of course, James, we know all that. We know our lives are short and uncertain and we know God's sovereign and we know.

And it's like James says, OK, you know all of this. Anyone then who knows the good that he ought to do and doesn't do it sins. It's not a mistake.

[3:29] It's not a slip. It's not a little tiny to be human is to err. It's sin to know the good you ought to do and not to do it.

So it's one thing to know it. It's another thing to do it. We've heard this warning from James before, haven't we? And he's just insisting on it again. Back in chapter one in verse 22, do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves.

Do what it says. So you know how you ought to plan. You know what you ought to say as you plan. Are you doing it? Is what James says.

You know that you're not to slander anyone or to speak against your brother. Are you doing it? You know you ought to humble yourselves and you ought to come near to God.

You know you ought to submit to him and resist the devil and seek more grace. Are you doing it?

And so this verse, standing as it does at the end of chapter four, casts its light back upon everything

that's written in chapter four.

[4:34] You know all this now. We've studied this now. Are you doing it? To not do what you know you ought to do is sin. In fact, it could go all the way back to chapter one and verse one.

In fact, it should cover every aspect of our lives. Anything that we know we ought to do and do not do is sin.

Now there's something here that we really need to understand and it's about a sin of omission. We need to understand sins of omission.

In other words, there's more than one way to sin. Many people, Christians included, need a broader definition of sin. To them, sin is doing things that you ought not to do.

So you hit someone and you say, I know that's wrong. That's sin. You steal. You cheat. You gossip. You lie. You lust. You hate.

[5:36] And you say, you say that's sin. Well, it's true that's sin, but that doesn't go far enough, does it? These are sins of commission. It's something you do.

It's doing what you ought not to do. But James introduces us to another whole family of sins. Sins of omission. And these are the things that you don't do, which you ought to do.

And so James here gives us a good definition of sins, of omission. It's the good you ought to do, but don't do.

So you see, the truth is that we can sin by doing nothing as well as by doing something. There's more than one way to sin. You can sin by doing bad things and by not doing good things.

Now, most people think of sin as the bad things that we do. But I would argue that far more often we sin by good things that we don't do, that we leave undone.

[6:48] We sin by doing nothing. Well, that's scary. Kids, you think, if I can just sit still and not say something stupid, then I'll be able to keep from sinning.

No. No. You can sin sitting there doing nothing, James says, when you ought to be doing something. Sin is, a sin of omission is the neglect of our duty.

We don't pray for kings and people in authority. We don't consider it pure joy when trials come upon us. We don't love others as ourselves. These are all things we fail to do.

We do not do what we ought to do. And James says it's sin. But because, you see, we're not doing anything, indeed, we're not doing anything expressly forbidden, we don't readily think of it as sin.

Conscience weighs in louder about sins of commission. When we lie, when we covet, we steal, we've crossed a line, we've transgressed, we've done what we knew we should not do, and so conscience rings the bell, you've sinned, John, you've sinned.

[8:00] But when we do nothing, conscience is often weak or silent altogether as far as condemning us of sin. Evil actions get far more attention than mere neglects.

And so sins of omission go easily undetected and unnoticed, overlooked, therefore, unconfessed and not repented of.

And that is a danger to the highest degree. So James is sensitizing our conscience about sins of omission. To know the good you ought to do and not to do it is sin.

Maybe you haven't thought about it in that way lately. James is saying you need to think about it that way. To not do what you ought to do is sin. We need a definition of sin that's that broad then.

Not only the transgression of the law of God but the lack of conformity to it as the Westminster Shorter Catechism defines it. So sins of omission are just as sinful as sins of commission.

[9:14] Sins of omission deserve eternal wrath from God just as much as sins of commission. And Jesus had to shed blood for our sins of omission for them to be forgiven.

He suffered for what I fail to do as well as for the bad things that I do do. Now James had hurt his older brother and the Lord Jesus Christ is often found in the Gospels hammering away at the sins of omission.

So we want to turn to sins of omission found in Jesus' teaching. We want to notice them and especially in his parables the stories he tells. And because they're familiar we'll not take the time to turn to them.

I'll give you the references if you'd like. But we're looking for Jesus' teaching on sins of omission.

The parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke chapter 10. You remember the story a man's traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho and he fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him and beat him and left him half dead.

And a priest is traveling along the same road and sees the man beaten and half dead and just walks on by the other side. A Levite also passes that way and sees the man bleeding and walks on by the other side and goes on his way.

[10:41] The priest and Levite are condemned in Jesus' parable. But why? They didn't shoot anybody.

They didn't rob him. They didn't harm him. They were just minding their own business, going to their appointment. They didn't do anything. Ah, but that's the problem.

They sinned by doing nothing when they ought to have done something. Love your neighbor as yourself demanded that they stop and help this man.

They sinned by doing nothing. How many times do we sin each day by doing nothing about people in need around us? Luke chapter 16, we have the rich man living in luxury every day and there's Lazarus, the poor beggar, laying at the gate longing to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table.

The rich man dies and goes to hell. But why? What was his sin? He didn't harm Lazarus. He didn't rob him.

[11:54] He didn't impoverish him. He didn't do anything. He just carried on life as usual. That was his sin. He did nothing when he should have had mercy and shown pity to the beggar.

He did nothing to harm him. But then again, he did nothing to help him when he ought to have done so. There's the parable of the talents in Matthew chapter 25 where the man's going on his journey so he calls his servants and entrusts his property to them and to one servant he gives five talents of money and to another servant two talents and to another one talent.

And when the man returned, he called his servants to give account of what they'd gained with their money, with his money. And the man with five talents had gained five more and so he's commended, well done, good and faithful servant and he's rewarded.

The man with two had gained two more and you know how the story goes. But the man who had been given one talent had simply buried it in the ground and so returned it to his master. And his master condemns him as a wicked, lazy servant.

He's thrown outside into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth and that's a reference to hell. Why? What has this man done? This poor servant.

[13:13] He didn't steal the talent. He didn't lose it. He returned it to the master just as he had received it. He didn't do anything with it.

Oh, but that's his sin. He was expected to put it to good use. He ought to have improved it. And he didn't.

What's been given to you? What money do you have? What are you doing with it for the kingdom? For this this one Lord Jesus who reigns, who gave his life for you?

What are you doing with your money? Are you doing anything to improve it and to cause it to benefit the kingdom of Christ? What are you doing with your health? You're healthy. You're able to get to church today.

What are you using your energy for? For the kingdom. Your time. You say, I'm not doing anything. That could be your sin. To do nothing when you ought to be doing something.

[14:16] The sin of omission. There were ten lepers who were healed by Jesus one day. Weren't there? And only one came back and thanked him. A Samaritan, Luke 17 tells us.

And Jesus asked, were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? So the nine come under the rebukes of Jesus.

But they didn't curse Jesus. They didn't spit on him. They didn't throw stones on him, at him. No, they're judged not for some evil thing that they did, but for the good thing that they failed to do.

They didn't return to give him thanks. And I think how often I'm on the receiving end of Jesus giving. Every day he's giving grace and more grace.

Grace upon grace. How often am I found thanking, returning? But if I don't, I don't necessarily have conscience alarming and say, John, you're sinning, you're sinning, you're sinning.

[15:20] Because I'm not doing anything, you see. I'm just not doing anything. So it's not so alarming to me as sins of commission. Matthew 23, Jesus is condemning the scribes and Pharisees.

And verse 23 says, Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You give a tenth of your spices, mint, dill, and cumin, but you have neglected the more important matters of the

law, justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former. They did a lot of good things, these guys. But they left other things, important things, undone.

And for that, Jesus condemns them. Sins of omission. Matthew 25, we have the separation of the sheep and the goats at the final judgment. Why do those on the left of Jesus hear from him?

Depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

Well, he tells them it's because of what they failed to do, what they did not do.

[16:27] You didn't feed my people who were hungry. You didn't give them drink when they were thirsty. You didn't invite them in when they were strangers and you didn't clothe them when they were in need and you didn't look after them when they were sick and you didn't help them when they were in prison.

We need to realize what Jesus is telling us. The day of judgment will be as much about the sins of omission as it is about the sins of commission. It will be as much about the good that we didn't do as it will be about the bad that we did do.

Five foolish virgins, Matthew 25, shut out of the wedding feast because of something they did not do. They did not take oil. They did not keep watch. The man who shows up at the wedding banquet, Matthew 22, without the proper wedding clothes on, he's thrown out on his ear.

He's cast out where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. Why? For something he didn't do. He didn't wear the right garment to the wedding. He didn't have the robe of Christ's righteousness, the garments of salvation.

It's something he didn't do. And so it was, as we read this morning in Matthew 7, in verse 12, that golden rule. Notice how it's written.

[17:40] So in everything, Matthew 7, 12, do to others what you would have them do to you. For this sums up the law and the prophets. Here's the sum of all God's law.

Do to others what you would have them do to you. The summary of the law is not don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you. If that were it, it would be easy.

Easier. I don't like you punching me in the nose, so if I just don't punch you in the nose, then I've kept the law. I don't like you stealing my stuff, so if I don't steal your stuff, then I'm good.

Well, you see, I can do with some of that stuff. I can do that. But that's not what the law is summarized by. The law is summarized by a positive statement of what we owe to our neighbor.

We are to do to them what we would want them to do to us. We are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. And so to not do so is to sin.

[18:43] I wonder if you've noticed before just how often the Lord Jesus accuses people of sins of omission. I say I hadn't seen it. It hadn't jumped off the page as it did this week as I scoured through his teaching and his parable just in a cursory fashion.

He accuses people for doing nothing for when they should have done something. And his half-brother James does us the service of summarizing such teachings of our Lord in one concise statement.

Anyone then who knows the good that he ought to do he ought to do and doesn't do it sins. He's sensitizing our consciences to the sins of omission.

Consider further examples of sins of omission. We have a good word from heaven. This is the book I need if I'm going to walk with God and fellowship with him.

If I neglect his word that's a good that I ought to do that I'm not doing. There are times when not to pray is sin.

[19:59] Samuel tells us that in 1 Samuel chapter 12 and 23 when the people asked for a king and they realized the great sin in asking for a king and rejecting God as king and his prophet Samuel as his mouthpiece.

And they pleaded with Samuel to pray for them after they had done such a foolish thing. Samuel says, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you.

It is my duty to pray for you. It is something I ought to do and if I don't do it I would be sinning against you. You know, there are obvious prayer situations in our lives.

When the situation calls for prayer it's screaming, pray John, pray John. As a parent there are times when the situation is a call to prayer and you're just not up for it.

Father, it's sin. It's sin. There are times as a church member that you're called to pray for your church and not to pray is sin.

[21:14] To know the good that we ought to do and not to do it is sin. There are situations when we should have trusted in God. Just taking Him at His word of promise and rested on it but we didn't.

That's coming short of what we ought to have done. It's sin. There are situations that we should have given money, should have given time and help to someone. We just stood by and went on the other side of the road.

There are times when I should have spoke a word of encouragement to a person and I didn't. There are times when I should have witnessed to someone. The opportunity was ripe, it was there and I didn't. I knew to do good and I didn't do it.

And there is time itself which we're told to redeem and to make the most of and how many hours have spun by on my watch and I haven't made the most of those hours.

I've known the good I ought to do and I haven't done it and there are privileges that I have. I was raised in a Christian home. I ought to be out stripping the world in graces and godliness for the upbringing that I have.

[22:25] I haven't improved every opportunity given to me. I haven't built upon it but I've gone backwards in some things. That's sin, James says.

We have freedom. We have freedom to witness, don't we, in our land. We don't improve that and make the most of it. Well, we're coming short. You see, any duty left undone, any duty left half done, any duty done half-heartedly, not with all of our might as we know that we ought.

It's sin, James says. In fact, coming short of perfection, the good that you know you ought to do and do it not, it's sin.

So James' definition of sin here in verse, at the end of chapter 4, finds something to confess in our very best works, our holiest accomplishments.

We might be able to avoid doing a few things here and there but who of us has ever loved our neighbor as ourself, loved our God with all of our hearts, who has seized every opportunity for doing good when we should have.

[23:39] Our best works leave us much to confess. So we need a broader definition of sin than just bad things that we do and James gives it to us.

It's the good things that we ought to do that we don't do. And in the light of this scripture, I would have to say that I qualify as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, sinner in this room because the privilege of the gospel ministry means that for hours I get to pour over the book from heaven that tells me what I ought to be doing.

And the difference between what I ought to do and what I am doing, James says, is sin. I'm a great sinner.

That's what James 4, verse 17, says about John Heaney. He knows a whole lot more than he does. You see, some of the greatest sinners I know are not people that are out cussing and committing adultery.

They're people who know a lot of what they ought to do, but they just go on living their life their way without doing what they know they ought to be doing.

[25:00] We all know more than we practice. And James says that is sin. So sins of omission reveal just how many my sins are.

What a mountain of sin. I've got to quit counting sins if I've got to count all the good that I ought to do and I don't do. I can't count. I'm sorry. I'm into infinity. As the psalmist says, they are more than the hairs of my head.

And if believers only concern themselves with sins of commission, they will only deal with the part of the iceberg of sin that's sticking out of the water and nine-tenths of the mountain of sin will be ignored and neglected.

There will be little confession, little repentance, therefore little wonder at the grace of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus, little appreciation for his work of suffering for my sins.

It's not a healthy state to live in. It's a dangerous thing to be living out of touch with this reality about sins of omission.

[26:14] Well, what difference does this truth make? If I'm gripped by what James is saying here, then I will have ample reason to always keep humbling myself before the Lord.

That's what James is after in James chapter 4, and I believe that's the hub of the whole book. Why is James showing us ourselves in front of our duty 50 times he gives us commands, and what does

he intend for us when we stand up to this standard and we see that we come short of what we know we ought to do?

Well, he's wanting us to humble ourselves before the Lord. And there's enough in James 4 and verse 17 to keep me humble all the way to heaven. I won't be looking down my nose at other sinners who do things worse than I.

I will be beating my breast and crying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner, me, the one who does not do what I ought to do. And I'll be able to esteem my brother better than myself because I see that I have not measured up myself to what I know to do right.

So this teaching on sin of omission should give us adequate cause to walk humbly with our God and humbly with all others.

[27 : 39] Secondly, it ought to expand our confession of sins. Have you noticed how general we can be in confessing our sins or is it just me?

When's the last time you've confessed a specific sin? Oh, we can be so general. I know I've sinned, Lord, but I don't know how. We've been able to keep ourselves from a few things that we haven't done, but we've neglected to do all that we've known we should have done.

My, oh my, then we can start confessing. Oh, Lord, I know this. I didn't do that. That's sin, James says. So it ought to be confessed. All sin ought to be confessed.

We have not known thee as we ought. We have not feared thee as we ought. We have not loved thee as we ought.

We have not served thee as we ought. Alas, the duties left undone, the work with little fervor wrought, the battles lost or scarcely won.

[28 : 51] What are we doing in that hymn? We're confessing our sins of omission. We ought to do this good, but we haven't. We have not known thee, feared thee, loved thee, served thee as we ought.

It's said that if you'd been living in Rygate, England on March the 21st, 1656, and had been in the room where the godly Irish Bishop James Usher lay on his deathbed, you would have heard him weeping out this confession as his last words.

Oh, Lord, forgive me, especially my sins of omission. Oh, my sins of omission.

With the sharpened focus of a man ready to meet his master, he struck with the immensity of his sins, and especially his sins of omission.

A 75-year-old man who had spent his life in the service of Christ, he had done much for Christ, but what gripped his mind as he came to the end was not what he had done, but what he had left undone.

[30 : 09] My sins of omission. And he rightly labels them as sins, doesn't he? As James teaches us. And he rightly seeks forgiveness from the Savior of sinners, which is also what James is seeking to teach us in this letter.

We have a Savior for sinners, for young sinners and old sinners, for sinners just beginning to realize something of their sins, for old sinners who are ready to meet the judge and realize all the things that they have not done in their life.

We have a Savior for sin, for sins of commission, the wrongs we've done, a Savior for sins of omission, the good that we've left undone. And so I say that a right understanding of the sin of omission should expand our confession of sins.

And thirdly, it ought to wither all claims of self-righteousness and send me running to Christ to rest my case for heaven on his obedience alone.

Isn't that what Jesus is often dealing with as he's giving these parables or self-righteous people who think they've obeyed God enough to tip the scales in their favor of God receiving them into heaven?

[31 : 34] Because they don't do these bad things and they didn't. And Jesus says, you will be judged for the good things you're not doing as well.

Now, who can stand in my presence? Are you really ready to stand and to give an account of all that you should have done that you didn't do?

No, that should wither every ounce of self-righteousness in us. That should make us flee to Christ do you know for every omission in my life Jesus fulfilled all righteousness.

For every time I came short of what I ought to have done, Jesus lived a life where he did everything that he ought to have done. Isn't that amazing?

We ought to appreciate the obedience of Christ far more than we do if we realize the category of sins of omission. It wasn't that Jesus just kept himself from lust and pride and slander and murder and hatred and no, he did everything he ought to have done.

[32 : 44] Everything the law commanded him to have done, he filled it up. Never once did he leave a duty undone. Never once was there something he ought to have done that he just wasn't up for it that day and he just didn't do it.

That's my Savior. That's what I need. I need somebody that's perfectly fulfilled the law of God. No lack of conformity to or transgression of the law of God.

That's Jesus righteousness and I cast myself afresh upon that this morning because I need that as I see that he counts as sin, not just the bad I do, but the good I don't do.

Lastly, if this has gripped me, it ought to make me glory in God's grace that is greater than all my sin. You see, my appreciation of the grace of God is as great as my appreciation of my sin.

And if I only think of sin in the category of transgression and of sins of commission, the bad things I do, I'll think, wow, God is really gracious. All these bad things that I've done, he is forgiven.

[33 : 58] But if I take on board what James is saying and realize there's also all these sins, the things I ought to have done that didn't do, and God's grace is greater than all my sins, then I'll just offer myself up and say, God, for all of your grace, what can I offer?

Here I am. I will drink this cup of salvation. I will rejoice in such a Savior. There's no Savior like you. There's no grace like God's.

sin. So a closing application for unbelievers and a closing application for believers. First, the unbelievers. What are your most serious sins?

Well, you must realize this morning that it may not be some bad thing that you have done. Your worst sin may actually be some good thing you have not done, like repenting of your sin, like trusting in the Savior, like giving your heart and life to Him in full commitment.

Lord, it's yours to not repent, to not trust in Christ, to take away your sins. Oh, you must know you are an eternal danger for what you have not done.

[35 : 30] Second Thessalonians 1.8, He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel. What are they punished for?

For something they didn't do. They didn't obey the gospel. They perish because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved.

It's something they didn't do. They didn't embrace the gospel of truth and love it and so be saved. They just kept on living life for themselves.

It's something they have not done. You're a bigger sinner than you realize. You're in bigger trouble than you ever thought. We read a lot about government bailouts these days, don't we?

They bail out businesses that are so in debt and so hopeless that without any intervention they will go under. And I want to tell you, my friend, out of Christ, you are such a person.

[36 : 33] You are so in debt over your head because it's not just the bad things you've done, it's the good things you haven't done. The only way for you to be saved is if the blood and righteousness of Jesus covers you.

Jesus takes all the punishment you deserve and he gives all the obedience you couldn't come up with. Only then will you be bailed out of hell. That's the gospel.

Come and trust in Christ. He has done enough for sinners to save them all by his merit. Whoever you are, whatever you've done, whatever you've not done, come to this Savior and he'll save you.

It's your gospel duty to repent and believe at once. So again today, you know the good you ought to do to walk out of here without immediately trusting in Christ to save you is to sin yet further.

Come to Christ. Come to Christ now. And believers, what do we do before a text like this? Well, I just gave you four things that we ought to do.

[37 : 44] We ought to be confessing more. We ought to be running to Christ's righteousness and resting and appreciating that. We ought to be glorying in the grace that's greater than our sins.

But we ought not to be satisfied until we're doing all that we ought to do. That's what James is telling us here.

We ought never rest satisfied. There ought to be a holy discontent every day that you live on the earth because you know what you ought to do is here and what you do do is here.

And that gap is your sin. How wide is that gap? So there ought to be this discontent. I want to do what I ought to do.

So are we repenting of these sins of omission? That's my question for believers. Are we repenting of what we're not doing? What are you presently repenting of that you're not doing that you ought to be doing?

[38:50] We often think of mortification of sin and repenting of sin as the bad things that we do and we want to stop them. But we must learn to think on the other side of the coin.

What sins of omission are we taking aim at? What sins of omission are we repenting of and confessing to God and asking grace to grow in and going out and seeking with all of our might to do differently?

What duties left undone are being targeted by you? Let me give you a hint where to look. It's usually the things we find difficult.

It's usually the things the flesh squirms about and hates. Those are the things that I'm talking about. Probably things you've worked on many times before and perhaps just given up on.

And so now you're omitting them. That's what we're talking about. Sins of omission. Certain duties in parenting, being a husband, being a wife, a child, an employee, a student, a church member, a Christian.

[40:00] What sins of omission are being mortified, confessed, prayed against, forsaken. or to put it into the present, what sins of omission will you declare war on this week, today?

There's a list with four things back home on my desk that need immediate attention. Things I know I ought to do and I have not been doing.

What is there on your list this morning? bring them to Christ. Join me in crying for more grace from our gracious Savior to deal with our sins of omission to glory and a full and free pardon and because of the perfect obedience of Christ on my behalf to seek to put to death every sin of omission.

Let's pray. Our Father, we humble ourselves before you this morning and confess that James has written by your Holy Spirit another word that seeks us and finds us and leaves us wanting.

And we have just confessed these sins to you and we now flee to Christ and ask you to look on him and to pardon us and ask you to give us that power to do what we ought to do and to give us to leave then glorying in a Savior whose grace exceeds our sin and going in his power to put to death not only bad things that we do but to be rid of not doing the good things that we know we ought to do.

[42:01] Thank you that there is power in you for both. Thank you that there is blood shed for both. Thank you that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Send us then rejoicing in him. We ask in his name. Amen.