

James – Life after Faith

James 4:17

“There is More to Being Right than Not Doing Wrong”

1. THIS VERSE CHALLENGES OUR ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT SIN
 - A. The deeds of sin we overemphasize
 - B. The definition of sin we overlook
2. THE VERSE CHALLENGES OUR APATHY AS SAINTS
 - A. We cannot declare our ignorance
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 - A. Are you willing to confess this sin in your life?
 - B. Are you willing to counter this sin in your life?

1. This past week, there was an article written about the nation of Israel, and how polarizing it can be on the world’s stage. Israel seems to be either reverently loved or violently hated.

2. The headline of the article was what caught my attention as I was preparing to preach from James 4:17. The headline read: “Israel: Doing No Right, Doing No Wrong”.ⁱ

3. In reality, that is an impossible position for anyone to find themselves in. You are always either doing right or doing wrong. There is no passive purgatory between the two.

4. James reminds us of this in the verse before us. He says very plainly, “...to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”

5. One writer says of verse 17, “In a real sense, these words form a summary of the entire Letter of James.”ⁱⁱ

6. No doubt, this is an important verse within this book, and for that matter, an important verse within the whole of Scripture.

7. In this verse Bro. James reminds us that being right involves doing right, not just abstaining from that which is wrong.

8. It could be that you have a perfect attendance record at the church house, but you have a sinful record with the Lord. It could be that your slate is clean morally, but your heart is corrupt spiritually.

9. You see; the Spirit of God reminds us here that sin is not just doing what you should not do, but it is also not doing what you should do. Got it?

10. This little verse contains big truths. It challenges us on a number of levels. I want you to think with me about the things this verse challenges. First of all:

I. THIS VERSE CHALLENGES OUR ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT SIN

1. I remember hearing an old saying growing up that went something like this: “I don’t drink, smoke, or chew, or date women that do.”
2. Unfortunately, we sometimes have a very narrow understanding of sin. We consciously or unconsciously make a list of things that we consider to be wrong, and live as if those are the only sins we need to worry about.
3. In James 4:17, we are reminded that our lists of sins are much too short, and that there is another list we probably have never even considered.
4. Notice a couple of things about our conception of sin, and how it is confronted in this verse. First of all, think with me about:

A. The deeds of sin we overemphasize

1. Sin is terrible. It is dangerous, destructive, and deadly. It is hard to overemphasize the peril of sin.
2. While most of us have some grasp of the dangers of sin, the problem is that relatively few really understand the definition of sin.
3. We tend to view only a select number of deeds and actions as being sinful. We know there are things we should not do, and when we do them, we are sinning.
4. We know you are not supposed to steal. Therefore, when someone takes something that does not belong to them, we all know that is a sin.
5. God says, “Thou shalt not kill.” We recognize then that when someone commits a murder, they have broken God’s law, and that deed is a sin.
6. All of this is true, of course. Sin is any deed that violates the law and command of God. We are right to recognize certain acts as sin.
7. The problem is that sometimes it is *only* these deeds and acts that we recognize as being sin. So someone says, “I do not steal. I’ve never cheated on my wife. I’ve never killed anybody. I do not do those things, therefore I do not sin.” That is the danger when we overemphasize certain deeds of sin.
8. Somewhere around a half a million people in America will die of cancer this year. There are some 200 different types of cancer that can attack the human body.
9. Imagine though that your doctor only considered lung cancer to be serious, and gave little or no thought to breast cancer, colon cancer, and brain cancer.

10. He is right to emphasize the dangers of lung cancer, but wrong to overemphasize it to the neglect of other, equally-deadly forms of cancer. In many ways we do the same thing with sin.

11. Notice something further about our assumptions regarding sin. Think not only about the deeds of sin we overemphasize, but think also about:

B. The definition of sin we overlook

1. Bro. James takes the definition of sin and expands it far beyond the typical, narrow view of sin when he says, "...to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin."

2. With this sentence, sin is no longer limited to back allies and bar rooms. Sin moves right into the church house and sits idly and proudly every single Sunday.

3. This is not a concept that is found only in the book of James. Paul says in Romans 14:23, "...whatsoever is not of faith is sin."

4. Though we would like to pigeonhole sin, and limits its definition to a number of immoral acts, the reality is that the Biblical definition of sin is much, much broader.

5. The truth is; it is not only sinful to steal from your neighbor when they have something you want; it is likewise sinful to keep from your neighbor when you have something they need.

6. Yes, it is wrong to tell someone a lie. Have you thought, however, that it is likewise wrong to *not* tell them the truth?

7. If you know that Jesus Christ is the way, *the truth*, and the life, yet you just let someone around you proceed blindly toward hell, you have sinned just as if you had told them they were in no danger at all.

8. Archbishop James Ussher, who died in 1656, offered up these last words before he passed: "Lord, forgive my sins, especially my sins of omission."

9. James reminds us in this verse that our views of sin are too narrow. Our conviction about the sins we commit is correct, but we need to be equally concerned about the sins we omit – the things we do not do that we should do.

10. Notice a second challenge we draw from this verse. It challenges not only *our assumptions about sin*, but notice also further that:

II. THIS VERSE CHALLENGES OUR APATHY AS SAINTS

1. Look again at verse 17. James says, *“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”*
2. In this verse there is someone who “knows to do good”, or as the ESV has it, “knows the right thing to do”. Yet, in spite of knowing the right thing to do, this person chooses not to do it.
3. While this verse could apply generally to all people, in the context of James, this verse applies specifically to believers.
4. With that in mind, the question arises, why don’t we as saints do what we know we should do? Why are so many believers apathetic toward the things they know God calls them to do?
5. In light of this challenge, I want to point out a couple of things. First of all:

A. We cannot declare our ignorance

1. James does not say that it is sin for a man to fail to do good things that he does not know he is supposed to be doing.
2. No, the sin comes for the one who knows fully what he should do, and yet chooses not to do it. His failure is not due to ignorance.
3. If you have been saved by the grace of God, then you have been brought out of darkness into the light. The truth of God has been revealed to your heart and mind.
4. The words of Micah the prophet are truer for you today than they were for the people to whom he originally spoke them.

5. Micah 6:8 says, *“He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee...”*
6. God has revealed Himself in His Word, and has sent His Spirit to reside in your heart. You can never say, “I did not know what was right.”
7. In the early 1600’s, a British jurist by the name John Selden verbalized a long-standing legal principle. He said, “Ignorance of the law excuses no man.”
8. In Romans 1:20, Paul essentially says that *no* man can claim to be ignorant of God. However, even if someone could claim to be ignorant, it would not be those of us who know God through Christ. We can’t use that excuse. You cannot say, “I did not do what I should have done because I did not know what to do.”

9. Understanding that we cannot declare our ignorance, as this verse challenges as our apathy as saints, I would add further that:

B. We cannot defend our inactivity

1. Again, verse 17 speaks to those who know what they should do, but they do not do it. Notice that James does not explain why they did not do it. Why do you think that is?

2. Why do you not do the things you know you should do? What are your reasons?

3. Someone might say, "Well, I know I should give more time to the things of God, but I am just so busy?" Does that sound like a valid excuse for disobeying God?

4. Someone says, "I know I should be giving to missions and supporting my church financially, but I just bought a new car, and I *really* needed those new shoes I bought on my credit card, even though I am paying twice as much for them when you count the interest."

5. You say, "I know I should spend more time in prayer, but I am really into *American Idol*, and *Lost*, and when they aren't on, I like to catch up movies I haven't seen yet."

6. Now do you see why James does not give a reason for this person not doing what they know they should do? It is because there is no real, valid, "good" reason to sin.

7. You can try to justify your spiritual inactivity - your failure to do what you know you should - but the real reason is your sinful apathy toward the things of God.

8. Daniel Webster and his brother Ezekiel were given a list of chores by their father that they were to complete before the end of the day.

9. When their dad discovered the work was not done, he said, "Ezekiel, what have you been doing all day?" He replied, "Nothing, sir." Then Mr. Webster said, "Daniel, what have you been doing?" Daniel answered, "Helping Zeke, sir!"

10. Now matter how well thought-out your excuse for not doing what God has commanded you to do, there is really no defense for your failure to do the good you know to do.

11. There is a third challenge we find arising from the simple but penetrating verse. It challenges not only *our assumptions about sin*, and *our apathy as saints*, but notice with me finally that:

III. THIS VERSE CHALLENGES OUR APPLICATION OF SCRIPTURE

1. One writer says of verse 17: “The basic lesson hardly needs any comment.”ⁱⁱⁱ That is the truth. This verse is so simple that I could have just read it, closed my Bible and sat down, and everyone here would have known what James meant.
2. Obviously, I have not done that. The reason why is because while this verse may be simple, it is far from easy.
3. The interpretation of this text is easy to find. The application of this text is hard to fulfill.
4. With that being said, this verse challenges us to do just what it says, and what James commanded chapter 1, verse 22: *“But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only...”*
5. It is not enough for you to say, “Amen” to verse 17. You must apply it to your life. How do you do that? Answer these two questions. First of all:

A. Are you willing to confess this sin in your life?

1. Listen again to Holy Spirit as He speaks through Bro. James. *“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”*
2. Underline those last three words -“it is sin”. Do you really see it that way? All those things you know you should do, but don’t, do you really see them as sins?
3. The truth is; they are no less sin than lusting and lying, they are no less wrong than greed and gossip. Sin is sin, and all sin is rebellion against God.
4. If you see your sins of omission in that light - as sin - then you are ready to deal with them as you would all other sin in your life – confess them.
5. I John 1:9 says, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*
6. The New Testament word for “confess” has at its heart the idea of agreement, of mutual understanding. To confess your sins, therefore, is to agree with God about them.
7. Confession involves seeing your sin as God sees it. That means that you are willing to sit down with a Holy God and say, “I agree with you. I am not doing what I should, and there is no excuse for it. It is sin, just as You say.”

8. The students in a Catholic school were required to go to confessional as part of their studies. To help them with this, they were told to make out a list of their sins.

9. A student stepped into the confessional, and the priest heard him unfolding a piece of paper. The student started reading, "I lied to my parents. I disobeyed my mom. I fought with my brothers and..." There was a pause, and then the student said, "Wait! This isn't my list!"

10. You are going to have get your list, including the sins of omission, and confess them to God, if you are going to apply this verse of Scripture.

11. In order to apply it, I ask you not only, are you willing to confess this sin in your life, but answer this question as well:

B. Are you willing to counter this sin your life?

1. It is one thing to agree with what James teaches in this verse, and to confess that not doing what you know to do is sin.

2. However, it is quite another to repent of that sin and counter that which you have confessed.

3. Biblical repentance involves not only *admitting* your sin, but seeking by the help of the Spirit of God to *abandon* your sin as well.

4. I know that there will always be things you ought to do, but fail to do them; just as there will always be things you should not do, and yet you do them.

5. We will never be sinless this side of heaven. I John 1:8 says, "*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*"

6. In spite of the fact that you will never be perfect in this life, part of applying this Scripture would mean that you seek to counter in some way the sins of failing to do what you know you should do.

7. Are you willing to do that? If you are, ask the Holy Spirit to show you some things *in particular* that you have not been doing, that you should have been doing.

8. If you will ask Him, He will show you. When you are shown those things, you must be willing to stop neglecting and start doing those things in order to obey this particular text.

9. Years ago, they used to have what were called “quittin’ services”. People would bring things down to the altar that they were promising God they were going to quit.

10. People would bring cigarettes, playing cards, movie tickets, and assorted articles of “worldly” amusements they were going to abandon. One lady came down empty-handed, and the preacher said, “Maam, what have you been doing?” The woman answered, “I haven’t been doing nothing, and I’m quitting that.”

11. Some of you need to counter the sin of doing nothing by obeying the call of Scripture, and doing those things you know to be good.

1. If you think about it, the sins we omit might be longer than the sins we commit. James reminds us that knowing to do good and not doing it is sin.

2. In John 3:18, Jesus described what might be called the greatest sin of omission. He said, *“He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”*

4. This verse applies to those who are lost as well as those who are saved. For those who are lost, it is the sin of all sins for you to know that Jesus died on the cross for sins, but to refuse to give your heart and life to Him.

5. For those who are saved, it is sin as well for you *not* to do those things your Savior has commanded you to do.

7. May the Spirit of God adjust our notions of sin, awake those of us who are living in sin, and apply His Word to our lives today!

ⁱ Chesnoff, Richard Z., Israel: Doing No Right, Doing No Wrong, 3/15/10, *The Huffington Post*, accessed 3/19/10, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-z-chesnoff/israel-doing-no-right-doi_b_499879.html

ⁱⁱ Gregory, Joel C., James: Faith Works!, (Convention Press, Nashville, TN, 1986), p. 96

ⁱⁱⁱ Blanchard, John, Truth for Life, (Evangelical Press, Darlington, England, 1986), p. 318