

Sins of Commission and Omission • James 4:17

After three years of public preaching Jesus was giving his last sermon. I'm not sure if last sermons have extra significance, but certainly it must have been important for Jesus. In it he envisioned that great future day when all of humanity will stand before God to be judged. We will be on the brink of eternity and God will ask one very important question of each of us.

Let's let Jesus preach his sermon for himself. It's found in Matthew 25:31-46:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When

did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave

me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Jesus loved to teach surprises and this sermon was full of them! Most of Jesus' listeners expected to be judged on whether they broke laws. They figured they would have to account for every infraction of the Ten Commandments. How many times did they lie? Did they steal? Had they murdered anyone? But Jesus never even mentions that. Instead they are being judged on whether they did good to the hungry, the homeless, the sick and strangers, to prisoners and the poor. The way God divides them is not on the basis of what they did bad but on whether or not they did what was good.

Everyone in Jesus' sermon seems caught by surprise because Jesus related everything to himself. He made it sound like he had come in disguise — that he was a homeless person under a bridge or a hungry person with a sign that says "will work for

food" or a cold person without a winter coat on a January day or a stranger looking for a place to stay or a prisoner hoping every day for someone to care enough to come and visit.

Whenever Jesus preached, he gathered a crowd. It's no wonder — his sermons were so interesting, so provocative, so disturbing. He held peoples' interest and attention. He was different. He was disturbing. I am not sure that they liked the fact that he was disturbing anymore than we do. But there was no doubt that when-

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ever he preached he told stories and those stories spun around in their minds long afterward.

Let's make a list to fit what Jesus said, a list of good things that we know to do. First, let's consider good things we can do personally:

Give a week of vacation to work on a Habitat for Humanity house.

Volunteer to serve at a mission where homeless people can eat for free.

Gather up extra clothes and donate them to a shelter where needy people can make use of them.

Tutor children who attend poor schools or need extra help they can't get at home.

Baby-sit for a single mom so she can run errands or have a few minutes to herself.

Give a temporary home to a teenager from a difficult home, a husband who has been kicked out of his house or a wife who has been battered.

Give money to help feed and care for refugees.

Tell others about the love of God and the good news of Jesus Christ. Only Jesus can meet needs and save souls from sin, so that's the best thing we can do.

Professionally there are also good things we could do:

Do business with companies that create jobs in the inner city.

Invest in a poor section of a metropolitan area.

Give a job to someone who is unemployed or who is being released from prison.

Provide benefits that help families have adequate health care.

Volunteer professional services in an underdeveloped country of the world.

Provide an internship to a young adult who needs a mentor.

Imagine that other people around us are Jesus in disguise. Instead of imagining that Jesus would show up looking and smelling and addressing and behaving just like us, imagine that he will appear in a different color skin, with speech that sounds strange, with behavior that makes us uncomfortable. In other words, we should see Jesus when we look at others in their needs.

Who are the "least" people in our lives? Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Jesus proposes a Christian logic that is totally opposite from common practice. Most of us like to associate with the "most" people, not the "least" people. We're proud to say we know those who are rich and powerful and famous. We increase our own prestige by our connections to people who are above us, not below us.

Think of some "least" people you may know: the shy person everyone else ignores; the old person who is no longer important; the little child; the disabled; the unattractive; the obnoxious.

I know a man who always lets others know where they stand in his pecking order. If he is talking to someone and I walk up, he may look away in the middle of the other person's sentence and start talking to me. Or, if you come along while he's talking to me, he will ignore me and start to talk to you. He picks the best person in his rating system and drops off the lesser.

I think Jesus would do just the opposite. He would give preference to the least instead of the best. He would favor the lowest rather than the highest.

Jesus wasn't just concerned about what we know but about what we do. The sheep-types and the goat-types did what they did so naturally and unconsciously that they didn't even realize what they were doing. Those who did so much good were surprised at the Judgment by how much good they had done. Those that did no good at all didn't even realize the opportunities they had missed and they lost the reward that could have been theirs.

Personally, I find it hard to do good. I can think of a thousand good things to do, but I barely seem to have time to get everything done for myself, much less meet the needs of others. It's so easy to become consumed with my own problems that it is very hard to see another's problems.

Jesus would say that an important part to solving personal problems is to serve other people. When other people become more important . . . when we see those far worse off than

we are . . . when we reach out to help in Jesus' name . . . we are benefited and blessed ourselves.

Jesus told a scary story in another of his sermons in Luke 16:19-26:

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

"But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

The rich man in this story used his wealth to keep poor people with problems at a distance. It wasn't that he hated Lazarus. He just built walls and gates around his house so he wouldn't have to see Lazarus' poverty and sickness. Out of sight was out of mind.

Perhaps if this rich man had been asked what would have been good to do for Lazarus he would have known, but the point is that he didn't do the good that he knew to do.

All of this leads up to a saying in James 4:17. The way James writes it gives the impression that it wasn't original with him. In fact, some people think that it was a common saying of Jesus. Since James was Jesus' brother, he may have heard it so often that he just included it at the end of the fourth chapter. The words certainly fit with Jesus' other sermons. It is the say-

ing: "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."

An ancient system for categorizing human sin divides between sins of commission and sins of omission. Sins of commission are things we do that we are not supposed to do. They are sins like murder, adultery, lying, stealing and idolatry. They are sins that we commit. Sins of omission are things we could do and should do but we don't. They are sin because of what we omit.

The simplest definition of sin is to "miss the mark". In other words, we have not done what God wants us to do.

A newspaper article in the Minneapolis Star Tribune was sub-titled: A Good Samaritan gets kicked in the teeth.

Connie Ballard saw the woman, clean and mild mannered, in the street on one of the coldest nights of the winter. When the woman asked to use the phone Ballard let her into her Minneapolis apartment. Then, remembering her missionary work with the homeless she agreed to let the woman spend the night, but only until 6 a.m. Ballard cautioned, when she had to leave for work.

Letting the woman in was a mistake. When Ballard came home from work the woman returned and Ballard let her in again. Minutes later the woman opened the door to several men who told Ballard they were taking over. Ballard was held hostage for the next three days in her Stevens neighborhood apartment, clutching her cat as her apartment buzzer rang almost constantly in a parade as drug dealers exchanged money and sold crack cocaine.

So, is it still true that anyone who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins? Doing good is always risky, just as loving is always dangerous. Please don't misunderstand. Neither I, nor the Bible, is suggesting that we do anything foolish. We need to have appropriate caution. We need to be wise. But if we are unwilling to take risks then we will never do good. We will never love anyone. We need to remember that as Christians we are followers of Jesus. Jesus came from the wealth of heaven to

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the poverty of earth and loved us dangerously and risked everything, and it cost him his life. It is a risky thing to do good.

So what should we do? There are several possible responses to all this teaching from Jesus and the Bible. I suppose we could ignore what the Bible says. The next time an opportunity arises to do good we could just skip it. Live selfishly. But that's sin. We can feel guilty about all the good that we don't do. I've tried this and it's a miserable alternative. Besides, that's not what God wants us to do. When Jesus died on the cross for our sins he took away our guilt. Why re-impose it? Or, we can do some good. Obviously, that's the best response.

Let's not try to do everything. None of us has the time, the energy or the resources to do all the good that needs to be done. But let us resolve to do the good God wants us to do. Not because we will get in trouble if we don't, but because we love God and we want to do good.

I have a short prayer to suggest for each of us. Pray it today. Try praying it every day for a week and see what happens:

“God, show me something good you want me to do and I promise I will do it. Amen.”

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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