

God Willing

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Preacher: Wayne Schuller

[0 : 0 0] Why don't I pray for us, friends? Lord our God, we ask that you would, by your Spirit, convict us of our sin as we come under your word.

Let it judge us and let it drive us to the Lord Jesus Christ, to his death and resurrection, for mercy and grace, to forgive sinners like us. So, Father, please help us now as we hear your word, to hear it and tremble before it. Amen.

Well, friends, human sin is like the proverbial onion. Human sin has layer and layer and layer. If you think you know what your sins are, there probably are layers beneath your sins that you don't know about.

Part of Christian maturity, I think, is finding, by God's grace, more and more dark corners of your heart that hate God. Tonight, James is going to challenge us to think deeper about the sin that's in our lives.

I think most people, most Aussies, maybe most Christians, only have one model of sin, and that model is called doing bad stuff. What is sin? It's disobeying God, doing bad stuff.

[1 : 1 9] And so, you know, you're trying to think of, say, some sins to confess. You're trying to think of, what bad stuff have I done this week? But actually, tonight we're going to see there's two types, in Christian ethics, there's two types of sin.

There's doing bad stuff, and there's verse 17, the final verse tonight. So if you have a look at it with me, we'll start at the end. Anyone then who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it commits sin.

So in the Christian ethical framework, there are two types of sin, doing bad and not doing good. Do you see how they're different?

And James says, anyone then who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it commits sin. So the first kind of sins are obvious, aren't they? They're when you lie or when you boast or blaspheme or steal or commit adultery or murder.

They're obvious sins. But James' verse 17 sins are less obvious, aren't they? They're the hidden layers of the onion. That's when you know the right thing to do and you don't do it.

[2 : 3 3] It's kind of, if the first type of sins are active disobedience, the second type are passive disobedience. They're both kinds of disobedience toward God.

They're both just as bad in his sight. And yet one is active, one is passive. If you listen carefully in church, actually, when you hear a confession read in church when we pray a confession together, it always has both kinds.

It always has, you know, a sorry father was sinned against you in thought, word and deed. But we'll also confess we haven't loved you with our whole heart or we haven't done the things we ought to have done.

So when we confess our sins in church, you're actually confessing what you've done wrong and the good you've failed to do. And those two types of sins, friends, go together.

And I think what happens is with the onion is that every sin normally has about at least 99 other sins hidden in the shadows. You may actually think you're a modest sinner when actually you may be an Olympic level sinner.

[3 : 40] You may be a Michael Phelps of sinning. I think every sin we do of commission, every active disobedience, often behind it lies a whole bunch of good things we should have done instead that we didn't do.

So it wasn't just one sin. It was a whole heap of things that we should have done instead of the bad thing we did. Now, James is not saying, I don't think the theology here is that God expects us to do every possible good thing there is to do, because I think that would be impossible.

But the sin of omission is when we have a very clear opportunity to honour God and don't take it. I may be getting complicated with the theory here.

So let's look at James and look at his two examples. He's got two examples. The first example is 11 to 12. The second example is 13 to 16. So it's pretty simple.

Let's look at the first example. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another speaks evil against the law and judges the law.

[4 : 49] But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who then are you to judge your neighbour?

What's the warning here from James? Well, on the basic level, it's a warning about not slandering a fellow Christian. I think it has in mind talking about someone when they're not present, talking about someone behind their back, speaking evil of someone, maybe making some implication that someone is not a genuine believer.

They're not the real deal. James says in verse 12, only God is the one who can save and destroy. So maybe it's by your words implying who's saved and who's going to destruction.

It's by your words implying who's in the kingdom and who's out when only God can do that. I think Christians do this all the time by implication.

We spiritually defame each other. We write people off. We kind of drop hints to show that they're not really a first class Christian like we are. You know, sometimes people will say things like, this is the church to be in.

[6 : 07] Or within a church they'll say, you know, this small group has the real Christians in it. Or they might say, in our small group we have the serious Christians.

By implication other Christians aren't serious, aren't the real deal. Or we might say, you know, in our group we do real Bible study. The implication is that others aren't really reading God's word.

Sometimes I think in churches there are cliques. And the subtext of the clique is that those outside the clique probably aren't really worth much in the kingdom of God.

Sometimes I think Christians form organisations or parachurch groups. Or they have email lists or blogs or secret meetings where they kind of say, you know, we are the true evangelicals.

We are the true reformed. You know, so and so, you know, he doesn't cut the mustard. He's beyond the pale. This is, all these kind of things I think is what James is condemning as speaking evil against a brother or sister in Christ.

[7 : 14] We're already seeing in James chapter 3, the power of the tongue. What's the power of the tongue? It's the power to destroy. And in chapter 2 of James we've actually seen the royal law of scripture, which is, he says in chapter 2, I'll read it here.

He says, you do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture. And he says, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. And he's quoting from Leviticus 19, which if you read it, go home tonight, read Leviticus 19.

The context of that love your neighbour as yourself is a whole bunch of commands about not bearing grudges, not hating a brother in Christ or someone else in the people of God.

It's all about, you know, loving your neighbour as yourself. When you speak evil of someone, you're not loving them as a fellow brother or sister, as sort of as your neighbour. See friends, here's the tension that I personally find, is that I like debates.

I like theology. I like actually calling a spade a spade and saying, you know, that person taught something and it was wrong. I like that kind of debate and I don't shy from that.

[8 : 26] I actually enjoy it. And I think it's important. But the problem is when our rhetoric crosses a line into sort of deciding who's really a Christian and who isn't, then I think at that point we trample the royal law.

We trample loving your neighbour as yourself. You know, there might be people who are immature Christians that we're embarrassed by that we write off.

But actually Christ has died for them. There might be people who should know better. They might be ordained and they should know better. They might be bishops. But we ought to be careful when we actually start implying that they're not a Christian unless we have very clear evidence on that matter.

There might be Christians who are actually complete nutters. They might be completely loopy. But they might love Jesus. And so we ought not to kind of crack jokes about them or speak about them behind their back disparagingly because Christ has died for them.

We ought to love them as our neighbour. Now, that's a good command, I think. And that's a challenge to not break that law. But there's also a sin of omission going on here.

[9 : 39] Look at verse 12. I'll actually read verse 11b. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another speaks evil against the law and judges the law.

That is God's law. And if you judge the law, you're not a doer of the law but a judge. And you should be a doer of the law. You're not meant to be a judge of God's law. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and destroy.

See, when you actually judge a fellow Christian and joke about them and write them off, you're actually judging God's law which says to not do that.

And if you're judging God's law, God wrote the law, God speaks his law, you're judging God himself. To disregard the commands of Leviticus 19 is to say that God's law doesn't matter.

It's to say that you are a judge of God. When actually God himself is the judge, isn't he? You are not the judge. I'm not the judge. So as we unravel the onion of sin, judgmental Christians, gossipy kind of disparaging Christians, are guilty of a deeper sin of omission.

[10 : 57] They are guilty of living as if the lawgiver doesn't exist. They are guilty of living as if God is not the judge.

When actually he is the judge. It's one of his most important roles and titles. He is the capital J judge, capital L lawgiver. The gossipy Christian, the judgmental Christian is guilty of the sin of commission, of not loving the neighbour as themselves, and of the sin of omission of living as if God were not the judge.

Friends, the great thing here is that if we as a church could have a stronger sense of God is the judge, the day of judgment we will all give an account before the throne.

If we have a stronger sense of God as judge, we will have better community. Because we will be less likely to speak against each other, to play the role of judge.

Because we know there is a judge and we tremble at that thought. The most picky and sort of disruptive and judgmental Christians I know are those who don't have a doctrine of judgment.

[12 : 13] Who just talk about God is only a God of love, not a God of judgment. They end up playing the role of judge themselves in their little communities. And they end up becoming very judgmental, picky communities.

But the most loving Christians I know, in my experience, are those who worship a God of love and judgment. They won't judge their fellow Christian because they've meditated on the judgment seat of God.

And they tremble at the thought. They don't want to usurp God's role as judge. And so they are not quick to judge a brother or sister. Friends, may that be true for us.

The sin of commission is gossip, judgment. The sin of omission is living as if God were not the judge. Let's look at James' second example now.

A second case study. It's to do with our planning and presumption and boasting. Verse 13. Come now, you who say today or tomorrow, we'll go to such and such a town and spend a year there doing business and making money.

[13 : 18] James is now attacking the Christian who speaks in a presumptuous way about their plans.

What is that person assuming? Just think about what is the person assuming when they say, I'm going to do this and then I'm going to do this and I'm going to make some money here and go there. What sort of things are they relying on that is unspoken?

Well, they're relying on, for a start, that they'll be alive the next year, aren't they? They're assuming they're going to be alive. They're assuming that they've got good health.

They're assuming that the economy and their business is going to run smoothly. In fact, they're actually assuming or presuming they actually have control. They're presuming they have some autonomy, which I don't think they actually have without God.

They're presuming they hold the reins of their life, that they are behind the steering wheel of their own life. When they talk like that and omit God. You see, the person who speaks like that, James, is angry because they haven't included God in those plans.

[14 : 26] So James is talking about the sin of omission, of not acknowledging that God is in control. And that we need God every day just to live, let alone do business, let alone travel.

I think we are very guilty of this, aren't we, in the West. We assume that our life is stable, that we have a right to good health and home, and that we'll see our grandchildren.

We kind of take all that kind of thing for granted. The problem is, once we assume such things and don't credit God, we start to credit ourselves and think it's in our power.

And yet James says, to humble us, yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. I mean, who of us really here knows what's going to happen Monday tomorrow?

I think I know what I'm going to do, but do we really know what's going to happen tomorrow? You know, anything could happen in the next few hours. God alone knows what's going to happen on your Monday tomorrow.

[15 : 30] We don't even know whether we'll be alive. Just a few weeks ago, a man was here at Holy Trinity at church in the morning, and he was dead that afternoon.

In fact, there was someone here in the evening a few months ago who was dead that week. So life is fragile. Life is fragile. God alone knows the dates.

God alone knows whether we'll be sick and whether we'll recover. God knows whether the world will keep turning as it is. He knows who'll win elections. He knows where we'll be in a few years' time, whether we'll be married or single, whether we'll have children or not.

God knows those things, and it's not even like we can make a good guess of it, is it? Because it's in God's hands. He could providentially will all sorts of things. We don't know what he's going to do.

Do you see the issue, friends? If you speak and leave God out, so I'm going to do this and this and this and leave God out, it's actually disregarding God, the one who actually holds the steering wheel.

[16 : 31] It's actually arrogant to speak like that and omit God. To actually make plans and talk up your plans without acknowledging the sovereign God is pure arrogance.

We need to get a grip on our place in the world. I mean, friends, think about what is your life? James tells you in our verse 14, What is your life?

For you are a mist that appears for a little while, then vanishes. This is your life. You're a mist that vanishes. You're like a puff of cigarette smoke in the wind.

It just puffs out and it's gone. You are like steam. You know, you sort of see steam and then it just, it's vapor. It disappears. You are not solid and stable.

God, the judge, he is solid and stable. You are not solid and stable. Our lives are not solid and stable. You know, Christmas is in three months.

[17 : 35] I'm planning my Christmas, but who knows whether, you know, this will be my last Christmas with my parents or with my children or whether it will be my last Christmas. We just don't know.

Friends, we ought to be saddened by the reign of death, but never surprised by it. Our life is a vapor. Our life is a mist. Even if you're young, even if you're 18 and fighting fit and you feel kind of immortal, you know, you could jump in a car tonight, drunk driver hits you, you're dead.

Our life is a vapor. You know, Helen and I have had friends. We had a friend who was 28. He had a pregnant wife and a two-year-old boy. Died in his sleep.

You know, saw his wife the other day. She's still struggling. Four years later, we had another friend, a young mum. Died in childbirth.

Leaves behind a 30-year-old husband and a healthy baby girl. You are a mist that appears for a little while, then vanishes. You know, the last eight years, I wake up almost every morning thinking about sudden infant death syndrome.

[18 : 50] Are my kids alive? You know, and sort of, as annoying as it is to have babies that cry and keep you awake and you kind of feel just so dead because you don't have enough sleep, you're thankful that this kid is fighting fit crying when he wakes you at 4am in the morning.

You know, there is something about having kids that really anchors this, that life is fragile. You know, when you go through a pregnancy, you know, the whole first trimester at least, you're praying, you know, God, will this baby come to full term or will it be another miscarriage?

You know, life is fragile and it's fragile for adults as well. Well, we depend on God. We need God. He's the one who's sovereign. He's the one who is in control.

So how should we speak? Well, James tells us, instead you ought to say, if the Lord wishes, we will live and do this and that. Pretty easy, isn't it, really? I mean, he's not trying to make us mechanically say that God willing at the end of every sentence, but there's a sense in which we could give God more credit.

Say, you know, if it pleases God, I'm hoping to do VCE next year and after that, go to uni. I've always wanted to get married, but I trust God and I trust that it will be God's plan, but we'll see.

[20 : 11] You could say, we don't know why our child has cancer, but we trust God that he's in control. Friends, we need to learn to sort of speak and include God in our language, even with unbelievers, maybe especially with outsiders, to show that we have this anchor, that we are not the ones who are the centre of gravity, but God is.

Don't ever, friends, let anyone tell you you're lucky. I mean, what is luck when there's a providential, sovereign God? People say to me, you're lucky to have four kids.

Well, there's no such thing as luck. I say, oh, I'm blessed by God. I'm blessed to have four kids. For the believer, there's no such thing as luck. There's only really two things, blessing and chastening from God.

And even the chastening is a painful form of blessing for our good. It's even worse when people say to you, look what you've done. You've made for yourself a great family or a great home or a great career.

Have you really done that? Or is that God's blessing to you? It made me angry when my daughter Lydia was born. Someone walked past the corridor just nursing her.

[21 : 29] And he sort of said, oh, is that baby new? And I said, yeah, I was born three hours ago. And he said, you've done well, or something like that. And I thought, no, I haven't.

I haven't done anything. This is a gift from God, as is every blessing, as is all health, as is all life, as is breath. Friends, what we desperately need here is to change our language, to reflect the reality that we believe God is in control, that we're not atheists, we're not practical atheists, but we are theists.

We believe God's sovereign. He's in control. It does make a big difference, if only for ourselves, because if we don't factor God in, what happens? You actually start to think that you are doing it.

You actually will start to think, I'm earning this. I'm making this small group great. I'm making this career awesome. I earned this house. That's what James actually warns against.

He says, as it is, you boast in your arrogance, and all such boasting is evil. If you leave God out of the equation, then if you commit that sin of omission, of leaving God out of your plans, then you will commit the other sin of boasting, of arrogance.

[22 : 48] So there the sin of commission is boasting. The sin of omission is living as if God were not in control, as if God were not sovereign. So we come back to James' conclusion, and I'll make it mine as well.

Verse 17, Anyone then who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it sins. Friends, stop speaking about other Christians as if you were the judge, as if you were God, the judge himself.

Stop slandering other Christians as if you held the keys to heaven and hell. If you have an issue with another Christian, take it to them as a brother.

Take it to the elders, the leaders of the church. That's a constructive, biblical way to deal with it. But don't gossip and write them off. And secondly, friends, James says, Stop making plans without God in the picture.

You know God is in control. At least pray about your plans and commit them to God. Part of me sort of thinks, I'm not sure this is right, but maybe God cares actually less about what decision to make and more about whether we acknowledge him in the decision.

[24 : 00] He cares less about telling us what to do and more about wanting us just to pray for wisdom, which James says in chapter 1 verse 5. Pray for wisdom and then pray through the decision and then just do it and actually acknowledge God in how you do it.

Friends, let's walk humbly before God. He's a sovereign, law-giving judge. I mean, I just find it fascinating that the two characteristics of God that James pinpoints are two very neglected aspects of God today.

That God is a judge and that God is sovereign. That God judges and God controls. They are neglected doctrines today. And I think a bad doctrine of God, a bad view of the characteristics of God, is the source of many, many sins of omission.

You stop trembling at the thought of God the judge, you become a judgmental person. You forget God is in control, you start living autonomously, independently, as if you don't need him.

Sin is like an onion. Behind every sin are layers and layers of more sin. How much we need the Lord Jesus, don't we?

[25 : 15] I actually think sins of omission are just as bad as active disobedience because they're an insult to the majesty of God. They're an insult to his character. They're a slur.

They're a fruit of living as if he were not there or as if we did not need him. Friends, we are all gold medal sinners, aren't we? The Lord Jesus has redeemed us by his death on the cross so that we could live forgiven under the God who judges and sets laws and under the God who rules.

May we live under that God and may we show people that we live under such a great God. Let's pray for that. Lord God, we thank you for who you are, for your unchanging character as lawgiver, judge, and sovereign king, the one who is in control.

Lord God, we confess our sins to you. We're sorry for how I've disobeyed you actively and passively. Show us, Father, the layers of the onions so that we can increase our dependence on the Lord Jesus and cling to him closer and trust in his death and resurrection and put to death those sins.

Help us, Lord God, to acknowledge you in all that we do, to have courage to do that in a way that's not clichéd, but we really mean it, that we depend on you. And may all our lives be for your glory, we ask in Jesus' name.

[26 : 47] Amen. Why don't we respond and stand and sing in just a moment.