



James 4:17 The Golden Rule of James' Epistle

Feb 14, 2016

Text: James 4:17

Before we begin, you might recall some statements we made about James as we began this epistle:

- Often called “the Proverbs of the New Testament,” “the book of James practically and faithfully reminds Christians how to *live*. From perseverance to true faith to controlling one’s tongue, submitting to God’s will, and having patience, this book aids readers in living authentically and wisely for Christ.” –ESV Bible
- Saints, we are a church that has LEARNED a lot. We must transition to a church that *lives* a lot...where we take what we have learned and actually apply it. Our particular call demands it.
- James urges us to trust God and obey by faith.

These sentiments are in keeping with James’ personality. God will often use us according to the passions He has given us. Again if you recall:

- James was the half-brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem. (Matt 13:55; Acts 12:16-17, 15:12-13)
- In his Ecclesiastical History Vol II, Eusebius writes, “Then James, whom the ancients surnamed the Just on account of the excellence of his virtue, is recorded to have been the first to be made bishop of the church of Jerusalem. This James was called the brother of the Lord because he was known as a son of Joseph, and Joseph was supposed to be the father of Christ, because the Virgin, being betrothed to him, was found with child by the Holy Ghost before they came together, as the account of the holy Gospels shows.”
- James Adamson writes, “James is addressing people who are supposed to know the rudiments of Christianity; and his aim, as in the Sermon on the Mount, is to set forth the theonomic (*Theo* means “God;” *nomos* means “law”) life in its essentials, that is, life lived according to God’s Law. James’ task, like Paul in his epistles, is mainly practical, to help the sincere to **live** up to their faith, and very often to correct errors, misunderstandings, and backslidings resulting in conduct unworthy of the Christian faith.
- **James makes no provision for “culture,” “contextualization,” or “blending in.” On the contrary, James calls Christians to be Christians and the Church to be the Church. Like Old Testament Israel, the church is not called to blend in but to come out.**
- James is often accused of “lacking grace” like Paul or “love” like John. But like all Scripture, his writings are **complementary** with Paul’s and John’s...not contradictory.

The Golden Rule of James’ Epistle

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. (Jam 4:17)

- Over and over again, James exhorts right behaviors. Over and over again, James lifts up holiness. Over and over again, James calls for purity in speech and thought. Over and over again, James points his readers to actions that reflect the heart of the Christ they say they serve.
- This verse, in many ways, sums up James’ entire epistle...to live in a manner pleasing to God and edifying to the church.
- However, James isn’t alone in the New Testament expressing such exhortations:

*Luke 12:47-48 **And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.***

*Heb 10:23-27 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. **For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.***

- One gets the sense that James wants the blood-bought believer to draw a spiritual line in the cultural sand and say "I stand with God!"

If we look at this Text in context:

1. Whenever we quarrel and fight due to our pride and selfishness, we sin.
2. Whenever we choose the world over God, we sin.
3. Whenever we refuse to submit to God and resist the devil, our likely actions will result in sin.
4. Whenever we refuse to cleanse our hands and purify our hearts, we sin.
5. Whenever we speak evil against our brother and place ourselves above God's law, we sin.
6. Whenever we fail to humble ourselves, we walk in pride and subsequently, sin.
7. Whenever we fail to acknowledge the providence of God, we sin. Basically...

Whenever we know the will of the Lord, and fail to do it, it is sin.

The Doctrine of Hamartiology, a reminder:

1. This word comes from the Greek, hamartia, which means "to miss the mark." This is a common word in Scripture for sin.
 - Sin defined in Scripture is "lawlessness" or "transgression of the law."
 - The shorter catechism defines it as, "disobeying or not conforming to God's law in any way."
 - Precious friends, sin is why Christ died! Sin is what separates us from a holy, loving God! Sin is the cause of man's misery!
2. Why the reminder? Because James calls not doing the **right** thing, especially when that thing is known, sin.
3. In other words, there is spiritual weight assigned to what he is teaching that we often miss. In fact, I believe there are many things we fail to do (omission) that God sees as sin.
4. My fear is that many believers don't see those things that way and instead are quite casual with themselves when they miss the mark.
5. Because we live in a society that has lost its fear of God, transgressions have become normalized. We are desensitized to iniquity. We say things like, "Yeah, I should have done that, but it's no big deal."
6. Saints, if we've been commanded to "do what is right," those commands are in fact a big deal!

Applications

1. First, understand that this sort of willful sin is the worst type; not a sin of **ignorance** but one that is deliberate.

2. Second, know that this sort of willful sin is **deception**. Remember James' words in James 1:22? "But be doers of the word, not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

10 Ways We Deceive Ourselves (Remember these?):

The below is based on my experiences over the years and my own struggles with my own sin. Be a good Berean and judge for yourselves. 😊

- ✓ We Fake Ignorance: I don't understand (because I don't want to), so I need to study it for 10 years. (Jn 8:43, 47)
 - ✓ We Procrastinate: I understand but I'm thinking about it...hopefully until I forget about it.
 - ✓ We Presume: "I'm not going to obey, and God is ok with that." Or..."God said that but he doesn't mean that."
 - ✓ We Idolize our Sin: "This is my one area of disobedience."
 - ✓ We adopt an Entitlement Mentality: "Because of my hurts and pains, God is ok if I skip this one."
 - ✓ We adopt a Crowd Mentality: "Everybody disobeys this! I'll be inconvenienced, embarrassed, lose money, fill in the blank _____!"
 - ✓ We use The Inappropriate Scale: "This particular obedience isn't as important as the Gospel!"
 - ✓ We use The Legalism Defense: "Walking with Jesus isn't about keeping rules; it's about relationship. We are saved by grace!"
 - ✓ We have Itching Ears: We seek out people who agree with our wrong. (2 Tim 4:3)
 - ✓ We sometimes, just Blatantly Rebel: "It's not right what I'm doing; I know it's not right, but tough and oh well."
3. So then, let us make EVERY effort to "do what we know is right!" There are no easy applications here. James allows no waffling, no carnal rationalizing, no using **grace** against the God who gives it, no biblically contrary decisions, and no excuses for those redeemed by Jesus.
 4. **It isn't that James lacks grace; it's that the call to obedience is absolute! It isn't that there isn't forgiveness; it's that God's mercy isn't to be taken advantage of.**

Finally...

James MacDonald writes:

"In this context, to do good (or 'the right thing to do' in ESV) is to take God into every aspect of our lives, to live in moment by moment dependence on Him. If we know we should do this, yet fail to do it, we are clearly sinning. Of course, the principle is of broader application. In any area of life, the opportunity to do good (or the right thing) makes us responsible to do it. If we know what is right, we are under obligation to live up to that light. Failure to do so is sin against God, against our neighbors, and against ourselves."

And there is the final point I'd like to submit to you. There are **consequences** for failure. Some are life-altering. Some are literally life and death.

What are the consequences of failing to disciple your children?

What are the consequences of failing to declare the Gospel to a hell-bound friend?

What are the consequences of unforgiveness in marriage, family, and friendships?

What are the consequences if the church refuses to recover her prophetic voice in the land?
What are the consequences of sinful, powerless, love-less, carnal lives and churches?

I submit such consequences are immense.

Are you willing to simply do what you know is right...obey the clear words of our Lord and Master? Not to earn His favor, but because you love Him?

In closing, this last Friday during family worship, the catechism devotional we read drove about the seriousness of sin home...

“True faith receives Jesus Christ. But it must receive Him as He is offered in the gospel. People have many different ideas about what it means to receive Christ. Some think that receiving Him adds something a little extra to their lives to make life better and happier. Others want to receive Him as the cure for loneliness or sadness. Some people think of receiving Jesus as receiving One who gives them power to triumph over life’s problems.

Jesus may do all these things for His people. But this is not how He is offered to us in the gospel. In the Bible, the gospel offers us Christ as a Savior from sin. God did not send His Son so He could make us happy or keep us from loneliness or help us with our problems. God sent Jesus to save us from the sin that had separated us from God. True faith in Christ understands that we are sinful and that, before anything else, we need a Savior. True faith receives Jesus Christ as He is offered in the gospel: as a Savior from sin. Read in the book of Acts these examples of how the apostles offered Christ to people as a Savior from sin: (Acts 2:38; 3:19-20; 10:42-43).” -Starr Meade

Given all that Christ has done, James’ admonishment should seem reasonable to the redeemed. Indeed, *“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Rom 6:1-2)*

Amen.