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TO HIM THAT KNOWS TO DO GOOD, AND DOES IT NOT, TO HIM IT IS SIN

All of us in the Church of God have very likely at one time or another read James 4:17, or we heard it quoted in a sermon.

Therefore to him that knows to do good, and does *it* not, **to him** it is sin. (James 4:17)

We know that breaking any of God's laws is sin. But "not doing good" is **considerably different** from breaking God's laws. No laws are broken when we don't act positively on an opportunity to do good. So why then is that sin?

When we through weakness give in and say or do something we really shouldn't say or do, then converted members of God's Church will experience feelings of guilt, and feelings of remorse. And those feelings should motivate us to repent and to change, and to determine to never again give in to that weakness.

But here is a question for you:

Have you ever experienced **feelings of guilt** because you didn't do some good you could have done?

Have you ever felt that **you had actually sinned** because you didn't do something that would have helped somebody else? Or have such thoughts never at any time entered your mind? Do you feel that as long as you try to keep all of God's laws, you're okay?

As mentioned in my articles on "Physical Sins and Spiritual Sins", the meaning of the biblical Hebrew word for sin is "**to miss perfection**", to miss the target we are required to aim for. Missing perfection is a far higher standard than just not breaking any of God's laws.

And when we don't act on opportunities to do good, then we are missing the mark we are supposed to aim for. Then we are missing perfection. And Jesus Christ clearly told us to strive for perfection.

Be (i.e. **become**) **you therefore perfect**, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

TWO DIFFERENT AREAS IN WHICH WE ARE TESTED

Before God will commit to giving us immortal life in His Family, God wants to have the absolute assurance that we will always use our minds in the same way that God the Father and Jesus Christ use Their minds, and that we freely accept God's way of reasoning, and God's standards of right and wrong. Are we eager to strive towards changing our own personality and our own character, in order to be in harmony with God's character? Or are we content with the character and the personality we have right now?

If we are not motivated to strive to think and to reason the same way that God thinks and reasons, then we can't really become "one" with God the Father and with Jesus Christ. In that case John 17:21-23 won't work for us. We can't become one with God if we don't think and reason just like God, regarding how we are to conduct our lives, including how we react to opportunities to do good. Do we react like God would react to those occasions? In order to "walk with God" (see Amos 3:3) we have to learn to think like God, regarding how we handle every situation that arises in our lives.

So God tests us, amongst others, in two different areas.

1) First we are tested in the matter of **obedience** to God. Are we going to put God's laws into practice in our lives or not? If we break God's laws, then we are sinning. **We don't get to decide** what is right and what is wrong. God makes those decisions. Are we going to always faithfully do what God tells us to do? And the most significant tests in this area of life come upon us when there is great pressure on us to compromise our obedience to God in some way or other. In those stressful situations are we going to be faithful to God or not?

2) And then there is another area in our lives, in which we are also tested. This involves situations and circumstances in which **obedience to God's laws doesn't even enter the picture**. There is no threat or danger that we are in any way tempted to disobey God. Possibly breaking any law of God does not apply to those situations; they are simply casual everyday living situations.

It is in situations where we are not in danger of breaking any of God's laws, that God finds out **another facet** regarding how our minds work, circumstances when we don't feel pressured by thoughts or actions that could perhaps be sinful. In those situations we are at ease.

In those completely stress-free situations an opportunity "to do good" suddenly pops up out of nowhere.

What do we do?

For a start, **do we even recognize that particular "to do good" opportunity?** Or are we totally oblivious to that opportunity? Let's face it, many times we don't even recognize those occasions. If, hypothetically, we were later asked about it, we would in many cases reply with: "what opportunity?". We simply didn't even recognize it.

But that response reveals an insight into how our minds think and reason. And that is not how God's

mind thinks and reasons. God always sees in our lives every occasion for us to do good that comes our way.

Mr. Armstrong taught God's people that "**love**" refers to "**an outgoing concern for other people**". The Apostle John tells us that "God is love" (1 John 4:8,16), and that means that God is aware of every opportunity to do good. For us "love" means that **we recognize opportunities to do good** for other people. And when we don't recognize opportunities to do good, that come our way, then we also don't really have love for other people. It is that basic.

On the other hand, "**perfect love**" means that we **always** recognize **every** opportunity to do good, that comes our way. That would be "perfection".

But that in turn means that at this point in time none of us have "perfect love". We all miss some opportunities to do good. None of us recognize every opportunity to do good that comes our way.

So our minds are not yet fully tuned to thinking like God. But the more opportunities to do good that we actually recognize, and then respond to, the more our minds will approach thinking and reasoning like God.

Identifying opportunities to do good is a learning process. And it is a learning process in developing real godly love, the love that is in the New Testament identified by the word "agape".

It is a learning process which requires from us a change in the way we use our minds, in the way we think and reason. If our minds don't change, then we will simply not even recognize many circumstances where we could do good for other people.

Right, recognizing occasions when we can do good for other people is the first step in developing godly love in our lives. Then comes the next step.

When we do recognize such unanticipated opportunities to do good ... what do we actually do with those opportunities? Do we then do the good, or **do we brush it aside** as not our business or responsibility? It's not as if in those situations one course of action involves breaking a law of God, and the other course of action does not involve breaking any of God's laws. How we respond only reveals **whether or not we really have that "outgoing concern"** for other people.

These are completely different tests from the tests we face regarding obedience to all of God's laws. These situations reveal **what we are really like** as individuals, what we will do when things are completely up to us, without fear of disobeying God. Living by all of God's laws only reveals a partial picture of what we are like as individuals. Whether or not we correctly identify opportunities to do good, and then how we respond to those cases where we do identify those opportunities, adds more details to the picture of what we are really like. And those added details are extremely important before God.

That's what the Apostle Peter was referring to. As Peter wrote:

And above all things have **fervent charity** among yourselves: for **charity shall cover the multitude of sins**. (1 Peter 4:8)

That statement reveals the enormous beneficial consequences for discerning opportunities to do good. Replace the word “charity” in this verse with the expression “**a desire to do good to other people**”, and you come close to what Peter is instructing us to do. It then reads as follows:

And above all things have **a fervent desire to do good** among yourselves: for **a fervent desire to do good shall cover the multitude of sins**.

A fervent desire to do good to other people reveals an attitude that God can easily work with. Such an attitude tells God that someone has “their heart in the right place”. And when that is the case, then “a multitude of sins” can be sorted out. Voluntarily doing good to other people, as a pattern of behavior, **tells God much more** about a person’s real character than obedience alone. Our voluntary outlook on life, and the behavior which that outlook produces, exposes the inner workings of our minds much more emphatically than commanded obedience alone.

So when we are really motivated by a desire to “do good” for other people, then God can deal with our shortcomings (i.e. our sins) more easily. Why? Because our minds will be thinking more along the lines in which God uses His mind. To genuinely look for opportunities to do good for people who really do need help, is **the most powerful way to express genuine love** for other people. It is actions and not feelings that count in this context.

Now don’t mistake this for doing things for people who are quite capable of doing those things themselves, people who like to be served. The “doing good” we are speaking about refers **primarily** to helping other people in ways or with things that they could not achieve on their own. It also applies to how we treat people, with courtesy, with kindness, etc. It refers to circumstances where other people really do need help, including such things as helping needy people with food and clothing, etc. But it is not referring to serving people who expect to be served, and who prefer to not do for themselves certain things that they really could do, and, in most cases, ought to do on their own.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWING AND THINKING

Now let’s consider the qualifying clause in James 4:17. This category of sin (i.e. not doing good) only applies to “him that **knows** to do good”. If we don’t really “know” what good we could be doing for other people, then we are not guilty of sin, as far as this specific aspect is concerned.

James 4:17 is in fact a very subjective definition of certain sins, of certain ways in which we miss perfection. It really depends on how much we know. So when we don’t know what good we could be doing, then we are also not guilty, right?

Well, not so fast!

There is a big difference between “**not knowing something**” and “**not thinking of something**”. When an unexpected opportunity to do good arises, not recognizing that opportunity at that precise point in time, is not the same as “not knowing how to do good” in that situation. Recognizing the opportunity to do good didn’t occur to us spontaneously, but if we think about it later, then we recognize what we could or should have done.

We had the knowledge for that situation, but we simply didn’t think about it.

This has happened to me personally quite a number of times in the past five decades. Without going into the specific details, here’s the process for what has happened to me a number of times.

I’m involved in some everyday activity when **out of nowhere** I’m confronted by someone who needs help. They are struggling to have money for food or they cannot on their own perform some activity that really must be carried out. But they don’t ask for money or for help. They don’t mention the real issue they are struggling with. They are not the typical beggar standing at a busy intersection. They are not looking for a handout. But they do need help. In some cases they don’t even speak to us personally; they just happen to come into our general environment.

In the specific situations in my life that I can recall, these people, who were total strangers to me, asked about something else, something other than their real need. I responded to what they had said, and they moved on. And **five minutes later** it hit me. I really should have helped them with the obvious problem that they didn’t even address. But they have gone and **now it is too late!**

And I feel guilty because in that moment I didn’t discern how I could have helped someone who really needed help. I only recognized the opportunity to help too late, when that opportunity no longer existed. In those situations I realized that I had sinned because I didn’t make use of the opportunity to do good. And that realization made me feel guilty. And it told me that I had to change my thinking, i.e. I had to repent.

Now the point is this:

It is not that I didn’t know how to do good. Knowledge wasn’t the problem. The problem was that **I didn’t spontaneously think of** doing the good in those circumstances. It only occurred to me later, when the opportunity for doing good in those situations no longer existed.

Now that is not always the case, that we lose that opportunity if we don’t respond immediately. Sometimes we have hours or even days when we can still “do good” with certain circumstances. But there are likely to also be some occasions when the opportunity to do good requires a fairly quick response, or it will disappear.

But we should understand the following:

Recognizing an opportunity to do good immediately, and not recognizing that opportunity until later, or even not at all, is indicative of two different ways of thinking. One way is the way of thinking that is focused on self, and the other way of thinking identifies an outgoing concern.

As I said, changing our way of thinking is a process that takes time. And the more often we spontaneously identify such opportunities to do good, the more we are progressing in the transition towards using our minds in a godly way.

THE NEED FOR LAWS

Now here is a point to consider:

The more often we spontaneously recognize, and then act on, opportunities to do good, **the less** we need laws to tell us what to do. Oh yes, the laws are still there. But nobody has to appeal to those laws in order to get us to do what is right, because we spontaneously do what is right and good.

That's one lesson we can learn from how Jesus Christ dealt with two different women, who had both been involved in immoral conduct. To the unrepentant woman caught in the act of adultery Jesus Christ said : "neither do I condemn you, **go and sin no more**" (see John 8:11). To "not condemn" is not the same as sins being forgiven. Whether or not her sins would be forgiven was still an open case. But she was admonished to stop her immoral conduct.

And to the other woman, who was what we would call a prostitute, and who really wanted to change, and who came to Christ of her own volition, Jesus Christ said: "**your sins are forgiven**" (Luke 7:48), without any kind of admonition.

Now we might think that the woman who had been living as a prostitute would have needed a strong admonition to not go back into immorality, perhaps even more so than the woman who had been caught in adultery. But that's not the case. The actions of the woman who had been living as a prostitute clearly demonstrated that she had made a commitment to change, and she didn't need to be told "go and sin no more".

The law is still very much there. But someone who has made a commitment "to do good" doesn't need to be reminded of the law.

In this physical mortal life God has given us His 10 commandments, and many additional laws. One reason all these laws of God are needed is because we human beings don't spontaneously do good on a permanent basis. To always do good is just not a part of our nature. So we need plenty of laws to guide us.

But once God has resurrected us to immortal life in His Family, then spontaneously doing good will be a

part of our nature. And **then we will need only one law** for how to respond **to God the Father and to Jesus Christ**. And we will also need **only one law** for how to treat and to interact with **every other created being** (i.e. everyone else who will eventually be a part of God's Family plus all the angels).

Okay, it's actually two laws.

But that is because there will be two different categories of spirit beings: those who have always existed (i.e. God the Father and Jesus Christ), and those who were created, and who therefore had a beginning (i.e. every other being). And it is only one law each to regulate our conduct with each of these two categories.

Jesus Christ explained this during His ministry, as recorded in Matthew 22:37-40.

Jesus said unto him, **you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind**. This is the first and great commandment.

And the second *is* like unto it, **you shall love your neighbor as yourself**. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40)

These are very likely the only laws that will exist in God's Family for all future eternity!

But in order for this to work, in order for these two laws to cover **every possible situation** that could arise throughout all future eternity, it requires that every individual in the new heaven and the new earth (see Revelation 21:1) will always spontaneously recognize and act on every opportunity to do good. It requires that doing good will be a part of the inherent nature of every individual in existence. (Satan and the demons will not be around.)

Any individual who will not spontaneously do good in every situation that might arise, would damage the relationships within God's Family. So individuals who will not spontaneously do the good they have recognized, cannot become a part of the Family of God. Yes, not doing good really does miss the target that God wants to achieve for His Family, for relationships which will continue into endless future eternity. And missing the target means that it is sin.

So far we have focused on doing good to other people. But this principle of doing good, whenever we recognize such opportunities, also applies to our relationship with God. To consider just one example in our relationship with God, let's look at the matter of personal prayer.

There is no law that requires us to pray to God the Father. But **we know** that we really should spend some time every day in private personal prayer to God. So when we don't pray regularly, then we are also not doing "the good" that we know we should be doing. So when we don't pray to God on a daily basis, then we are certainly falling short of perfection, i.e. **then we are sinning**. In that situation we are not sinning by breaking any of God's laws. No, in that situation we are sinning because we don't do the

good we know we should be doing.

Not praying as a regular daily practice reveals a certain mind-set. It reveals a mind that does not value personal contact with God as highly as certain other activities, to which we freely devote our time. And it also reveals that our own conscience no longer makes us feel uncomfortable whenever we go through a day without praying to God.

Every member of God's Church needs to understand that when we do not pray to God on a daily basis, then the statement "to him that knows to do good, and does *it* not, to him it is sin" squarely applies to us. And that is just as serious as not keeping God's Sabbath, because not praying regularly reveals **a mind that does not really fear God.**

So doing the good we know we could do applies to all relationships. It applies to our relationship with God, and it also applies to our relationship with every other individual. Discerning the good we could do is one essential component for working towards perfect relationships amongst all people in God's Church in this age, and for establishing perfect relationships amongst all spirit beings in God's yet future Kingdom.

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