

SINS OF OMISSION

Evan A. Fry, Radio Director
Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ
of Latter Day Saints
Independence, Mo.

Sunday, May 23, 1943
10:00 p.m. KMBC, 980 KC
Kansas City, Mo.
All Rights Reserved

TEXT: James 4:17.. To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.

Is a man good when he does no evil? If he is, then the most moral thing in the world is a stone or a clod of dirt, which never does anything. Righteousness, or goodness, is much more than a mere NOT DOING of evil. It has to be a DOING of good.

Mencius, a Chinese philosopher of the third century before Christ, once said, "Men must be decided on what they will not do, and then they are able to act with vigor in what they ought to do." There are certain things which we know we must not do. Every man has some kind of code, even if his code of action is to recognize no code. Every one of us has made up his mind that there are certain things which are not right, or ethical, or moral, or desirable, so far as WE are concerned. (Even thieves and criminals have a certain rough code of honor -- a certain list of things they will not do.) And perhaps all of us, no matter how good, need to add a few things to the list of things in our code which we WILL NOT DO, for many of us waste half a lifetime vacillating this way and that, trying to decide whether or not this or that or the other action is morally desirable -- veering aside whenever the temptation or the opportunity to do that doubtful act is presented -- never quite sure of ourselves. We can see within ourselves the wisdom of Mencius' advice. It is morally efficient and highly desirable that we make up our minds once and for all about doubtful moral practices, decide one way or the other, settle the problem finally and irrevocably, and having done so, free our minds for the business of planning what we WILL do instead of dissipating our energies trying forever to decide what we will not do.

The danger which confronts so many Christian people is that having established our code, which satisfies us, we shall regard ourselves as perfect if we approximate that code, and regard as highly IMPERFECT all who fail to measure up to it. We make up our minds once and for all that we won't murder, or commit adultery, or steal, or lie, or cheat in business, or beat our wife, or burn down our home to collect the insurance. Some of the stricter ones add to the list that they will NOT drink alcoholic beverages, that they will not smoke, not gamble, not play cards. That's all right if they want to abstain, but if forever after they pride themselves simply on NOT doing a list of things, and hold themselves obnoxiously superior to those whose code does not happen to exclude them, while neglecting the necessities of a positive righteousness, the Christian who DOESN'T DO a lot of things may be worse than the unbeliever who commits a few things the believer regards as sins, but goes on to DO more righteous deeds than the man who scorns and condemns him. I have known people who drank and smoked and swore and gambled, who in some aspects of their lives were better Christians than the people who condemned them and held themselves aloof from such terrible sins.

The sins of omission may be more damning than the sins of commission. Once we have established our code of things which it is unbecoming for us to do, if we simply DO NOTHING, either good or bad, and count our abstinence righteousness, we are worse than fools. James says, "To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin." We cannot simply abstain from evil, and be passively good. Righteousness is far more than abstaining from evil. It is something positive,

assertive, dynamic. The whole message of Jesus was positive rather than negative. Confucius, about 500 years before Christ had expressed the golden rule in negative terms -- "Do not do unto another what you would not have him do to you." But a rock or a stone could follow that teaching. It is dead, meaningless. Jesus gave life to the same philosophy by expressing it positively, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Jesus was always concerned about sins of omission. You can read through all four gospels and not find a single instance in which he condemned or dealt harshly with a thief, a murderer, an adulterer, a liar, a gambler, or a drunkard. This is not to say that he approved of or condoned these sins. It simply means that Jesus was forever on his guard against the attitude of mind which establishes its own righteousness by condemning someone else. He was forever concerned that his followers should be DOING SOMETHING GOOD, not merely abstaining from evil. He knew that if they were busy at some good task, the evil would take care of itself. Read the 23rd chapter of Matthew, his bitterest condemnation of the Pharisees. If you study it very carefully, you will see that he does not condemn them for keeping their code. He never says that it is wrong to pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, or to polish the outside of the cup and the platter. These things ought ye to have done, and not left the other undone! In their zeal for keeping their own insignificant code of DO's and DONT's, they had neglected justice, and judgment, and mercy, and faith. They did not enter the kingdom themselves, and by excluding all who didn't comply with the rigorous but silly restrictions of the Pharisaical code, they prevented others from finding or entering that kingdom. The thing that condemned the Pharisees was not the things they DID do, but the things they DID NOT do.

(It is very often necessary that we DO something in order to be good citizens, or good Christians. If someone should break into Red Cross headquarters and with reckless unconcern destroy all the blood plasma in the blood bank -- well, no punishment would be too severe for the man who had deprived our soldiers of the blood they need -- which may mean life or death to them. But if everybody just neglected to go and GIVE any blood, the effect would be the same; the same soldiers would die for lack of blood when needed.) If someone should embezzle a few billions from the treasury of the United States, what a hue and cry we should raise about defeating the war effort! But if a few million people fail to do anything about buying war bonds and stamps, the treasury would be just as empty, and the war effort just as badly defeated. If you are driving a car or a locomotive, and see a red light that means STOP, what do you do? If you deliberately ignore it, that's criminal; but if you carelessly ignore it, the effect may be the same, and a judge and jury will probably call it criminal negligence. A few years ago an excursion steamer burned off Atlantic City, almost within sight of land, and scores of people lost their lives because the owners and operators of that ship had DONE NOTHING about fire protection or lifeboats, or life belts, or any of the obvious safety precautions that should be taken aboard a vessel. These sins of omission had exactly the same effect, and harmed exactly as many people, as if someone with criminal intent had plotted to set fire to a boat on which were no fire extinguishers, no life belts, and no life boats.

If you want to know just how seriously Jesus considered these sins of omission, study a list of his parables. Some of them, of course, are parables of LIKENESS: The kingdom of heaven is like leaven in three measures of meal -- a pearl of great price -- seed sown by a sower -- a treasure buried in a field -- a net cast into the sea. Forget those for a moment, and consider the parables which have to do with men's moral action, and you'll find that almost every one of them is concerned in some way with the things MEN FAIL TO DO. In the parable of the mote and the beam, it was not wrong to try to pick the mote out of a brother's eye -- but it was

foolish and wrong NOT to pick the beam out of one's own eye. In the parable of the two houses, the sin was not in building on the sand, but in omitting to build upon the rock. In the parable of the rich man who pulled down his barns and built greater, it wasn't building bigger barns that was sinful; it was FAILING to note the needs of people about him. The barren fig tree did nothing wrong, except to FAIL TO PRODUCE. The man who buried his talent was certainly playing it safe; he had done nothing wrong, or so he thought. But his sin was in DOING NOTHING with his talent. It was not wrong for the rich man to give Lazarus the crumbs from his table, but it was wrong to FAIL to give him some bread and meat. The men who neglected to come to the wedding feast were cast out, and others took their place. The man who got into the wedding feast, but had neglected to put on the wedding garment, was likewise cast out. The five foolish virgins were not sinful in failing to get oil for their lamps. No code of "thou shalt not's" was violated, but they were excluded from the wedding supper because they had failed to observe the "thou shalt's."

But perhaps the most significant of all the parables (and there are others that might be mentioned) is the parable of the good Samaritan. Had you ever noticed that Jesus had no word of condemnation for the robbers who beat and stripped the traveller on the road to Jericho? Whatever else you may say against them, those thieves were not hypocrites. They were obviously and patently thieves, taking the chances of their profession. They committed a positive sin, one easily condemned by almost any code of the civilized world. But as the victim lies there beside the road, there come by two men, one at a time -- first a priest, and then a Levite. Here were professors of religion, men who would have been all too quick to condemn the sin of highway robbery. But by passing by on the other side, by ignoring the victim, they actually compounded that original crime, and made the victim's death more sure. Which was worse --the thieves who made no pretense of religion, and who took their chances with punishment, or the religious men who pretended religion, but condemned a man to death by their FAILURE to do what should have been done, with no danger of suffering as the criminals they actually were?

Sometimes deliberately, and more often quite carelessly, we omit doing the thing God would have us do. Our righteousness is negative -- a mere abstaining from evil, with not much if any following after good. Jesus was concerned not so much about what men should NOT do, as with what they should do. He knew that a man who is busy with good deeds has no time for evil. He knew that when men are genuinely concerned about their righteousness, they want to DO something about it. The thousands who heard the preaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost did not ask him what they should NOT do. Their own hearts told them that. They cried out in their desire to know, "Men and brethren, WHAT SHALL WE DO?" That was the cry of the Philippian jailer to whom Paul preached. It needs to be the cry of millions, many of whom have been content for long years simply to ABSTAIN FROM EVIL -- content with being good, without being good for something. We have not entered the kingdom of God ourselves, and we have prevented others from going in. We have tithed our mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law. We have condemned the robbers of the world, but done nothing to restore their victims. We have condemned those who failed to live up to our code of "thou shalt not's", but have excused ourselves for our failure to measure up to God's code of "thou shalt's." To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.