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Whoever Knows The Right Things To Do And Fails To Do It,  
For Him It Is Sin

James 4:17

**Prayer:** *Father, I do, I thank you for your grace, I thank you for the grace of that water as a matter of fact, and Father, I thank you for the grace that this church represents, the fact that we can gather here, that we can come before you freely still, we just praise you and thank you for that. And we thank you for your word, we thank you for the incredible gift that it is. We pray that as we again open up your word this morning, we would again have the gift of the presence of your Holy Spirit; speak to us, open up our hearts, our eyes, our ears, our minds, we pray, and give us the ability to make your word of lasting value, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, our text for this morning is the final verse of Chapter 4, it's verse 17. Now, I didn't read it last week because it's such an important verse, I think it really deserves a message of its own. It's delivered as James' final thought on the difference between religious sense and kingdom sense, something that we spoke

about last week. Last week we looked at James 4:13-17 which says this, it says: *Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit" -- yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.*

Well, the businessmen that James is speaking of here, these are folks that just didn't get it at all. They thought they still owned their times, their lives, and their resources. They had this classic religious sense of what it meant to be a believer. Just follow the religious rules, just come to church, pay your tithes, keep your nose clean, do what we say, not what we do, and you can keep the rest of yourself for yourself. That's what religion does. Sure it has a bunch of rules that you have to follow, but it keeps God at a safe distance. It makes God manageable, and God hates that.

God says in Matthew 15:8: *"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."* These businessmen that James is speaking of, they had this religious sense of how

life was to be lived, but not a kingdom sense. And God, frankly, was not welcome in their business. God was for Sundays, God was for church, God was for religion. This was not Monday through Friday activity. This was business. This was making a living, and what's God got to do with that? Well, basically everything. James is saying if you want the kingdom attitude spelled out for you, I'll do that, and he says so in James 4:13, he says: *You should say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."* You know, James is simply saying that God's will should have a critical role in two different areas of your life, like I said last week, this or that. That covers everything. But then James adds this final verse, and it's really a bombshell. Let me just read you James 4:15-17. He says: *Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.* What James is detailing here is really one of the final nails in the coffin of self-righteousness.

When I spoke about this last week, I spoke of this ongoing tension between living our lives for the kingdom of God or merely living out the religious rules that enable us to manage our relationship with God. And you see, our history from the Garden of Eden onward has been to minimize our fallenness, our helplessness before a

perfect God and to somehow manage our lives as damaged but still functional creatures still capable of our own forms of righteousness. God will not accept that. God is absolute perfection, and he demands of his creation the very same perfection. You know, we think God grades us on this sliding scale based on our own ability, and that is a tragically mistaken view. The God of flawless perfection must demand the same perfection of the creature that he created in his own image, and that perfection is something that we are no longer capable of. You know, we say "to err is human" or "nobody's perfect," as if that's an excuse. It's not. And since the fall of Adam, each one of us is born already shrouded in this imperfection that he has cursed us with. You know, we probably all heard the line "In Adam's fall, we sinned all." As our federal corporate head, Adam's sin became part of each and every one of our lives and each and every one of our sin life as well. God tells us we're broken, and we say, "not so much."

Since the fall of Adam, we've spent much of our energy trying to find ways to work around God's demand of us that we be perfectly righteous. You know what the term "work around" means? It's a computer term. Basically what it means, it's describing trying to find a way to work around a bug in a computer program. There's a bug in our program. And the bug in our program is that we are no

longer the perfect creatures we were intended to be. Adam and Eve were the perfectly righteous creation of a perfectly righteous God, and it is they who gave up their righteousness and it is we who have inherited their imperfection. Adam and Eve had but one commandment to observe in the Garden of Eden: Do not eat of the forbidden fruit. Instead of obeying, they conspired with the serpent to find a work around that would enable them to be like God, and we know the result of that attempt was this disastrous collapse of human nature. Every subsequent son or daughter of Adam inherited from them a desire to work around God's program and come up with our own form of righteousness. God gave us the Ten Commandments not as a to do list of rules that would enable us to inherit heaven but as a flawless standard of his holiness that would prove to us once and for all that we were incapable of meeting God's standard of perfection. See, the law of God was never intended to make us perfect because it was incapable of doing so. It was designed to show God's character and perfection and to prove to us that we were absolutely incapable of matching that perfection.

One of the ways I like to use to illustrate the role of the law is to describe the signs you see at Disneyland or some of these other amusement parks. They're usually about four or five feet tall, they have a scale on them that says, "In order to go on this ride,

you must be" and then there is a mark, and it says, "You must be this tall." And what they are intended to do is to simply demonstrate that children under a certain size are not allowed on the ride. Well, that sign on one level, it illustrates what the Ten Commandments are designed to do. You see, if the sign demands that you be four foot ten and you're only four foot nine and a half, then the sign tells you you've not met the requirements; you can't go on the ride. But that's all the sign can do. It can't give you that extra half an inch that you need because it doesn't have that power. It can't qualify you at all. It can only tell you that you have literally come up short of the standard. That's precisely what the Ten Commandments were designed to do. They were designed to tell us in ten different areas what God's standard was.

Exodus 20:1-3 says this: *And God spoke all of these words, saying: "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me."* That's the first one. Now, the first one demanded that we place nothing, nothing before our worship of God. Our greatest love, our greatest joy, our greatest hope, our greatest ambition must be God first. That first commandment's really all the deal breaker that we need. I mean, I don't think we even need the other nine to prove to us that we can't meet God's standard. That first

commandment does what all of the other commandments are designed to do, they're there to prove that we can't meet God's standard. So the first commandment stands there like an amusement park sign that's a hundred feet tall and it says, "You must be this tall to enter into the kingdom of heaven." Now, the sign like the commandment has no power to make us a hundred feet tall. It can only show us how small we are compared to how tall we need to be, and so it is with the other nine.

Listen to them. This is Exodus 20:4-17, it says: *"You shall not make for yourself a carved image. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Honor your father and your mother. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's."* That's the standard. And man's response to these Ten Commandments was to begin the process not of acknowledging our utter hopelessness and dependence on God but to begin to try to find work arounds that would enable us to manage our fallenness and still keep God at bay. It was the Pharisees who devised new ways to reproduce Adam's sin of finding their own

righteousness through works instead of through faith.

You know, last week I spoke about the Pharisees and how they had created these 600 or so sub commandments that they issued in order to increase compliance to the Ten Commandments. They tried to take every area of the Ten Commandments and then break them down into these doable rules that they thought would make folks righteous enough for heaven. By the time Jesus began his public ministry, it had become well established that the pathway to righteousness lay not so much in faith in God's provision, first through the blood of a sacrificed animal and then through the blood of the one whose animals symbolized Jesus Christ. No, that pathway to righteousness was now seen as this rigid adherence to these rules that the Pharisees had devised. That's why Jesus detested what the Pharisees had done. Luke 11:46, it says: *Then he said: "Woe also to you experts in the law! You load the people with burdens that are hard to carry, yet you yourselves don't touch these burdens with one of your fingers."* So here's what happened. God gives us the law, and the Pharisees give us a work around. The law was designed to force us to grace, to force us to accept by faith the righteousness that only Jesus Christ could give us, but you know, most people preferred the work around. Better to give lip service to 600 or so rules and regulations than to actually have to work through what it means to trust God for the power to love him and to



love my neighbor. So we see during Jesus' ministry on earth, not only is he there promoting these Ten Commandments, he's also there doing something else; he's reducing God's law down to two commandments.

Listen to Mark 12:28, it says this: *One of the scribes approached. When he heard them debating and saw that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which command is the most important of all?" "This is the most important," Jesus answered: "Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your mind, and with all of your strength. The second is: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no command greater than these." Then the scribe said to Him, "You are right, Teacher! You have correctly said that He is One, and there is no one else except Him. And to love Him with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all of your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, is far more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices."*

Jesus was amazed at that. He was amazed to find someone who genuinely seemed to get it, someone who addressed the issue directly. You see, the scribe knew that the kingdom was about far more than just obeying a set of rules, and he also knew that God

understood that loving your neighbor was far more important to God than empty rituals. Verse 34 says: *When Jesus saw that he answered intelligently, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And no one dared to question Him any longer.* You see, the scribe was close but he still thought that satisfying God's perfection was within the realm of our ability.

There's another case of another person and another circumstance who heard similar words from Jesus but had a far more typical response. This is Luke 10:25, describing another instance, it says this: *Just then an expert in the law stood up to test him, saying, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the law," He asked him. "How do you read it?" He answered: "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your strength, and with all of your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." "You've answered correctly," He told him, "Do this and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"* You see what Jesus is doing here? He's citing the impossibility of living up to the law by simply having the expert recite it. Verse 27 again: *He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your strength, and with all of your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."* In the history of human kind from Adam's creation to the moment that Jesus is right there testing

him, there was no one capable of doing that. There was no one capable of obeying that simple command. And so once again Jesus takes out this hundred foot sign, this gigantic sign of the law that says you must be this tall to enter, and nobody can measure up. Absolutely no one; save one. It's the very one who's asking the expert the question. You see, the scribe came near to the kingdom. This expert, well, he never even came close. So the expert's response to Jesus' question is very simple. He says, "*And who is my neighbor?*" Now, that was not an innocent question. What he was touting was yet another work around, yet another attempt to find a way to produce our own righteousness. Verse 29 says: *But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

You know, the vast majority of the people are just like this expert. We all want justification. We just don't want it God's way. We want it our own way. And the very doctrine that our faith hangs on is the doctrine, God's doctrine of justification by faith. Romans 4:2 explains it. Let me just read it to you. It's very brief. It says: If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to brag about -- but not before God. For what does the scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness. Now to the one who works, pay is not considered as a gift, but as something owed. But to the one who does not

work, but believes on him who declares the ungodly to be righteous, his faith is credited for righteousness. This is the doctrine that insists that God's justice is satisfied not by anything that we do but only by faith in the perfect sacrifice of the only perfect human who ever lived. This is justification by faith in Jesus Christ. You see, God tells us exactly what is behind the countless work arrounds that we erect. Whenever we encounter this hundred foot sign of the law, the sign that tells us that we don't measure up, we just try to justify ourselves, and we do that by seeing our goodness in relative terms; that is, we see our goodness in terms of other's badness.

And I'd like to illustrate it this way. I've said this before. I said, just imagine that you are a pirate and imagine that you are the member of a pirate crew that's marauding off the coast of England in the 1600s and these pirates, they take over ships, they rape the women, they torture the men, and they extract from them everything of value that they can and then they cast them into the sea to drown. But you're not like the rest of these pirates. You don't rape. In fact, you refuse to torture and you seek to have the victims after they've been robbed put out to sea in rafts rather than simply drown. And now if you were to ask all the other pirates on the boat what they thought of you, what do you think they would say? They'd say well, he's a good pirate; he's a moral

pirate. In fact, they might even say he's a goody-goody pirate. The fact is, in spite of how good you appear to your fellow pirates, you're still a pirate. You're still a thief. You're still a breaker of the Seventh Commandment. Now, relative to pirates who rape, torture, and kill, hey, you are a saint. Relative to God, you're not much different than they are. And so it is with all of us. You see, we understand our goodness not according to God's standard of perfection but only according to our relative standard of human goodness. We think I may not be the best, but I'm certainly not the worst. My goodness is based on other's badness. God's standard of goodness, the standard that he judges us by is flawless perfection. God sees only two moral states: There is flawless perfection which he calls good, and there's anything less than perfection which he calls not good. This is what God says in Romans 3:10. He says: *"As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."*

See, this is the dilemma that everyone outside of the grace of God faces. The sign of God's law says you must be perfect to enter the kingdom of heaven. Now, the sign can't give you the power to be perfect; it can only point out to you that you've not measured up to the standard required to enter in. And our history is one of

God showing us his standard of perfection and us desperately seeking a work around to enable our own righteousness to be sufficient. There's nothing more difficult than for those outside of the grace of God to admit that their righteousness is just not righteous enough. God gives us the Ten Commandments to prove to us that we're not righteous; and in response, the Pharisees give us 600 sub laws all designed to insist that those who follow these rules can somehow be righteous on their own. Jesus tells us that we not only have to love God flawlessly but we also have to love our neighbors as ourselves. And we ask Jesus, well, who's our neighbor? You see, every time God insists we can't be righteous enough, we find a way to insist that we can, we find a work around.

Another classic example is the Sermon on the Mount. You know, along with the beatitudes, Jesus also gave us insight as to just how impossible it is to justify ourselves by our good works. You know, it never ceases to amaze me that people think that -- that there on the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is giving us a new set of doable commandments, sort of a New Testament version of the Old Testament Ten Commandments, when in fact what Jesus is doing is expanding the Commandments to include areas that the rule keepers never even thought of. It's as if Jesus is saying, you know, you think you can be righteous enough by doing these commands? Okay.

Let's look at what these Commandments are really demanding. Consider Jesus' words on the Sixth Commandment adultery in Matthew 5:27. This is what he says, he says: *"You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell."* You see what Jesus is he doing here? He's addressing those who saw the Commandment against adultery as something that was imminently doable. We can do that. Then he uses a series of statements that preface his remarks with the Old Testament understanding. He says, "You have heard it said," but then he adds, "But I say." And then he takes that very same commandment and he expands it exponentially by including not just the act of adultery but any kind of lustful look, thought, or intention, and then he declares them as being tantamount to adultery. The rule keepers might have felt quite righteous having avoided the actual deed of adultery, and that's what they thought they needed to do, but here's Jesus expanding the Commandment to go way beyond what the rule keepers thought.

Jesus does the exact same thing in another area. In Matthew 5:21, he says this, he says: *"You have heard that it was said of those*

of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." You see, once again Jesus is addressing the -- the righteousness by rule keeping mentality that by saying, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder.'" Then once again he follows up expanding on the commandment by saying, "But I say," then he goes on to say essentially to exponentially expand and enlarge the commandment so that those who thought they were saved by not actually killing somebody now understood that the command also forbade even being angry with their brother. You see what Jesus is doing here? See, the law created this hundred foot sign that says you have to be this tall in order to enter, and to those who somehow think we can puff themselves up to a hundred feet, he sends out this devastating message, and he's saying it's not a hundred feet, it's not a thousand feet, it's an infinite height above your capabilities to try to be righteous enough by doing. Now, you think you're obeying the commandment because you're not killing somebody. And yet Jesus insists the law not only forbids murder, it also forbids insulting somebody. Jesus goes on to say, "Whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." Again, you see what God is doing here? To those who think that their righteousness comes from



obeying the law, Jesus just keeps expanding the demands of the law.

And that brings us to James' statement in our text this morning. You see, James is dealing with the very same people that Jesus was dealing with. These were the folks who thought they could manage a work around in their relationship with God. Just follow the rules, just follow the religious rules, come to church, pay your tithes, keep your nose clean, do what we say, not what we do, and you can keep the rest of yourself for yourself. See, that's what religion does. God has his proper time, and his proper time is Sunday morning. God has his proper place, we know it's right here on Sunday mornings. This is where God belongs. James goes right at those folks by saying this in James 4:13, he says: *Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit" -- yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.* But then he adds: *So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.* See what's going on here? See, God gives us the Commandments to prove that we can't be righteous by works. The Pharisees give us a whole set of sub

commandment work arounds to insist that we can somehow be righteous. God gives us two great commandments: Love God, love your neighbor. We give God the "so who is my neighbor" work around. God gives us the Sermon on the Mount expanding the law to include areas the law doers never even considered. And now James ups the ante even more. He's saying that it's not only the bad things that we must not do, but it's also the good things that we do not do that are sin.

So is traveling and trading and profiting bad things that we must not do? Absolutely not. That's not what he's saying. What he's saying is that it is traveling, trading, and profiting as if God were not welcome there that James sees as the good we do not do, and he tells us this, too, is sin. So if the Ten Commandments and the two great commands and the Sermon on the Mount and James' admonition all serve to show us that works cannot save us because we will always fall short of this hundred foot sign, well then what more can God say to keep us from trotting out yet another work around, something that enables us to cling to our own righteousness instead of accepting by faith the righteousness that Jesus alone can bring? Well, Jesus actually gave us the final word on when it comes to trying to be good enough by works. It's in Matthew 5:48. This is what Jesus said: *"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* This has to be God's final word on

our ability to be good enough for God. You want to work your way into heaven by virtue of your good deeds? Well, as long as those good deeds are transcendentally flawless, as long as they're perfect, well, you've got a shot. We all know nobody's perfect. There is no work around that will provide the perfection we desperately need to be worthy of heaven. There's no work around. There's only a work through. And the only work that was ever worthy enough to be acceptable to God is the work that Jesus Christ did for us on the cross. It was there that he exchanged his righteousness for our sin. There by faith we appropriate the perfection we must have, just as our heavenly Father has. Ephesians 2:8-9 says: *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Jesus often told stories to illustrate points. Jesus tells us a story to illustrate the difference between his righteousness freely given and ours pridefully claimed in Luke 18:9. This is what he says: *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice*

a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." I think one thing we all know about tax collectors is that they were considered to be the lowest of the low, the scum of the earth, absolutely unworthy of heaven. So Jesus paints this picture, we have this Pharisee coming with his rule keeping, his pride, and his prayers, and he's armed with all of these work arounds that have enabled him to manage God, keep his pride and see himself as righteous enough for heaven. Verse 13 says: "*But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'*" The tax collector's got absolutely nothing but the mercy of God and the gift of repentance. But that's all he needs. God says in verse 14: "*I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.*"

Now, the central doctrine of Christianity is the doctrine of justification. This has just instantly taken place in the life of this tax collector. God has declared this ungodly man to be righteous. No rule keeping, no rituals, no work arounds, no

attempt to manage his God, just genuine faith working through the gift of repentance, and the most wicked of sinners is justified. Now, if you're getting the impression that we are far more sinful than we thought we might be, you are getting close to the kingdom. From the Ten Commandments, to James' admonition, to Jesus' demand that we be perfect, we have God's insistence that righteousness is something we have none of and that only He can provide.

Now, there are two approaches that we can have to discovering this depth of our own personal wickedness. On the one hand, you can reflect that knowledge backward and revel in what a worm you are, or you can project that knowledge forward to the wonder of a God who insists on loving creatures whose wickedness largely escapes them.

When I was a brand new Christian, I thought there was basically ten different sins because there was ten different commandments, and in the 40 years since I've been a Christian, I have discovered levels of wickedness within my own self that I never imagined existed. None of these were a surprise to God. None of our own wickedness that sometimes shocks even us is ever a surprise to God. That's who we are, and that's who he is. Romans 5:8 says: *But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* When James says in James 4:17: *So whoever knows the right*

*thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin, that's just another nail in the coffin of our own attempt at self-righteousness. We sin because that's the way we were born. That's what we inherited from Adam. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. As one commentator stated it: A cow doesn't become a cow by mooing, she moos because she's a cow. We do not become sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners.*

Like I said, our history from the Garden of Eden onward has been to minimize our fallenness, our helplessness before a perfect God, to somehow manage our lives as damaged, okay, we'll admit that but we're still functional creatures still capable of our own forms of righteousness, and God will not accept that. God is absolute perfection, and he demands of his creation the very same perfection. Like I said, we think God grades us on a sliding scale based on our ability, and that is the source of our work arounds. It is a tragically mistaken view. God's great task with us is getting us to see what he already knows. And the more we know, the more we come to realize the truth of Tim Keller's observation. Let me finish with this. He says, we are more wicked than we ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted in Christ than we ever dared hope, and both at the very same time. Let's pray.

*Father, we thank you that we are so incredibly wicked and so incredibly loved. We thank you that you supplied the perfection that we could never, ever supply. We thank you that the sign of the law is not just a hundred feet tall, it's a thousand feet tall, it's a million feet tall, it's infinitely tall, and it says you must be this tall to enter and we are not and we never will be, but thanks to you and your perfection, we can appropriate your wonderful perfectness, your wonderful record, your wonderful life, your wonderful nature, and become what we could never be on our own. Thank you for the gift of that perfection. Thank you for your Son. We praise you in Jesus' name. Amen.*