



Black Lives Matter and George Floyd: our sins of omission can't hide anymore

D.B. Ryen



“Whoever knows the right thing to do but doesn't do it, to him it's sin.”¹

There are two broad categories of sin: sins of *commission* and sins of *omission*. Sins of commission are doing the wrong thing, that is, actively breaking God's law. These get the majority of the focus in biblical teaching and in our moral lives. Similarly, sins of commission get lots of attention in the Bible: Cain and Abel, David and Bathsheba, Judas' betrayal of Jesus. We see these evil actions very clearly as sins, and such deeds are condemned regularly in church and in society as a whole.

On the other hand, sins of omission get very little focus. These are the good things we *should* do but don't. Paul hints at these two types of sin in Romans: “I don't practice what I want to do, and I *do* practice what I hate!”² Both are equally sin and both are equally detrimental to ourselves and those around us. But unlike committed sins, sins of omission are much easier for us to sweep under the rug. After all, we didn't *do anything wrong*.

Or didn't we?

Simon was a boy in my neighborhood when I was growing up who wore hearing aids. One day, my

friends thought it'd be funny to incessantly tease him about it. I knew it was wrong, and I didn't join in the bullying, but I did nothing to stop it. This went on for an hour or more, and I said nothing, not even when he ran home with tears in his eyes. Simon's mother was understandably irate when she found out what had happened. My backside still hurts from the punishment I received later on at home, a painful lesson about my sin of omission.

Sins of omission are much more subtle than those of commission, but looking closely, we see them time and again throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, Moses instructed Israel that if you see your neighbor's ox wandering, you must return it. Or if his donkey is stuck in a ditch, you must help get it out.³ It's not good enough to just watch disaster or misfortune happen and not do anything about it. In Malachi, God came down hard on Israel for failing to tithe. “You're cursed with a curse, because you – the whole nation – are robbing me!”⁴

The same theme occurs in the New Testament. Jesus taught that “eternal punishment” awaited

¹ James 4:17

² Romans 7:15

³ Deuteronomy 22:1-4

⁴ Malachi 3:9

those who failed to do good for those in need. “As much as you *didn’t* do for the least of them, you didn’t do for me.”⁵ Furthermore, Paul criticized those who didn’t care for members of their own household, stating they have “denied the faith and [are] worse than an unbeliever.”⁶

Or take the parable of the Good Samaritan.⁷ The focus tends to be about the mercy and generosity of the Samaritan, but there’s an equally important lesson with regards to the Priest and the Levite who did *nothing*. We all condemn their inaction, but what we need to recognize is that *the inaction is sin in itself*. Their inaction wasn’t neutral – it revealed their wicked hearts. Their inaction *itself* was sin.

Evidence of our sins of omission has been recently brought to light with the Black Lives Matter movement. When George Floyd died, there wasn’t just one police officer there, there were many. As the one knelt on his neck for eight minutes, the others did nothing to stop it. They all heard his gasping, they heard him pleading “I can’t breathe,” and they all saw him turning blue. But the others didn’t stop the tragedy that was unfolding, even ignoring the pleas of bystanders to do so.

One of the big faults of our society throughout history is the tolerance of racism. It’s not good enough for people to simply *not* be racist, we must systematically *oppose* racism when we see it, even when we’re not directly involved in the act. People are at fault (i.e. sinful) when they allow racism to continue and not speak out against it. *This inaction is sin*, just like when I didn’t speak out when Simon was being bullied. And this tolerance of injustice and inequality has been a great sin in our world for ages. I’m certainly guilty of it.

The answer to police reform isn’t defunding or disbanding; it’s not systematic change or sensitivity training. The police force has many good men and women working hard in tough conditions to keep us

all safe. The answer to reform is at the individual level: good officers must stop tolerating injustice and cruelty by their colleagues. The sins of omission within the police force must stop – that’s the answer to police brutality. Change won’t come through politicians or legislation; it can only come through individual members of the force. Otherwise, tragedies like the death of George Floyd will continue.

But let’s be clear: these rampant sins of omission aren’t isolated to the police – they occur in our offices, our schools, our hospitals, our government, and in our streets. All around us, evil only thrives when good men and women do nothing. Reform of the police force is just one small part of how our whole society must be reformed to “purge the evil” among us.⁸ We’re all to blame for George’s death, simply by contributing to a culture where evil – like racism and cruelty – is tolerated.

When we fail to produce the fruit of the Spirit, through negligence or inaction, it’s just as much a sin as producing the rotten fruit of the Devil – greed, lust, pride, and the like. There’s no neutral ground when evil occurs. There’s no turning a blind eye to injustice, no sticking our heads in the sand. God knows all our sin – the evil we commit and the good we fail to commit. Both are equally sin; both are equally detrimental to ourselves and society. And, as we are currently seeing with protests around the world, our many sins of omission are continuing to plague us still.

D.B. Ryen is a medical doctor and writer. His books include The Story of Jesus: All Four Gospels In One and Birth Control for Christians. He lives with his wife and children in Alberta, Canada.

www.dbryen.com

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⁵ Matthew 25:45

⁶ 1 Timothy 5:8

⁷ Luke 10:30-37

⁸ Deuteronomy 17:12b; 1 Corinthians 5:13b