

The Law of Liberty

James 1:17-27

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Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

The title of today's sermon is "The Law of Liberty." The word "Liberty" has a dual association for me because I am originally from Liberty, MO (although I have lived the last 30 years in the Washington, DC area). Indeed, my maternal grandfather, who died before I was born, was a police officer in my hometown, and thus he might be called "the law of Liberty."

James here is not talking about my grandfather or my hometown, but he is talking about a principle of freedom. But doesn't this phrase "law of liberty" sound strange? Law has to do with "binding" while liberty has to do with "loosing." How can there be a "law of liberty"?

I have three answers to that question: God has implanted the word within us. The law of liberty bridges thought and action. Religion has to do with inward and outward. Let us deal with each of these points in turn.

First, the law of liberty has to do with the nearness of God and God's word. James says that God has implanted God's word within us. We do not have to go out there somewhere for God's word, but it is within us. As the mystics say, God is closer than our breath.

Jeremiah in the Old Testament looked forward to a time in which God would put the law within believers. God says, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."¹ Ezekiel said something similar when he said, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."² (When the Newhearts married, we took this verse in Ezekiel as the theme verse for our wedding.) And this new heart and this inner law is exactly what James has in mind. God's word, God's will, God's law is implanted in our hearts. And as a result, there is freedom.

First Church speaks of the law of liberty in the first part of its motto: "Living in Spirit." I perused your very informative website, and I saw a plethora of ways that First Church attempts to live in spirit. The website says, "We offer transformational spirituality in practice and celebration of the Holy One among us through worship, faith formation, and music." Through all of these activities, God plants the word in our hearts, the word to love God and the word to love your neighbor as yourself.³ James calls this the royal law and says that mercy triumphs over judgment.

¹ Jeremiah 31:33

² Ezekiel 36:26

³ See James 2:8.

When I was a youth, I was very concerned about finding God's will for my life. The impression I had was that God's will was a secret that I would find only after much searching and much toil. Sometimes that is true, but more often the truth is within. Frederick Buechner said that your vocation in life is "where your greatest joy and the world's greatest need meet."⁴ Howard University's own Howard Thurman said something similar: "'Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."⁵ So, the law of liberty has to do with the nearness of God and God's implanted word.

Second, the law of liberty is that which enables us to move from hearers to doers, from thought to action. Don't you wish that you had something that would give you a follow-through so that you can not only hear the truth but do it, not only intend but act? "The road to hell is paved with good intentions," as the old saying goes.

James uses an interesting analogy. He says that those who hear but don't do are like those who look at a mirror but instantly forget what they look like. Can you imagine that? Someone looks in a mirror and sees that their hair is combed or brushed, and their glasses are on straight, but then they leave the mirror, and they forget. Is my hair combed? Are my glasses straight? And they must go back to the mirror repeatedly because they keep forgetting. An important part of doing the word is remembering the word and that it is not an external command, but it is something that is implanted in you. Something that makes you feel fulfilled and delights your heart.

On this church's website, 17 mission partners are listed, including Adelbrooke, the Bridge, and Hartford Rolling Anvils. (I look forward to seeing those anvils rolling down South Main St.) These are ways that First Church not only hears the word, does the word.

Third, pure religion is focused both outward and inward, that is, it consists of assisting the marginalized and nurturing one's own spirituality.

Verse 27 says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." In other words, religion is all about caring for the marginalized and for one's own spiritual growth. First's mission statement found on Facebook reads as follows: "First Church seeks to be a center where spirituality and caring come alive in faithful Christian community nurturing all people in the living Spirit of Jesus." Spirituality and caring, these are the two wings on the plane that is First flying.

What kind of balance does your personal religion have? Does it fly on two wings? Does it stand on two legs? Those two wings or two legs are the inward and the outward: the inward, in which you care for your own growth, your own relationship with God, and the outward, in which you reach out to others. I came across this poem that seems applicable:

⁴ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/7/18/vocation>

⁵ <https://www.inspiringquotes.us/author/7200-howard-thurman>

This, my dear, is the
greatest challenge
of being alive.

To witness
the injustice of
this world

and not
allow it
to consume
our light.⁶

Witness in the Christian tradition is not just observing but it is speaking out. In Acts, Jesus says just before his ascension, "You shall be my witnesses."⁷ Observe, speak, serve. This is what it means to be a Christian witness.

In summary, then, James defines the law of liberty in three points: (1) God has implanted the law within you. (2) The law of liberty bridges thought and action. (3) Religion is both outward and inward.

In closing, let us remember what civil rights activist Ella Baker said, "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes."⁸ May we believe, may we love, and may we grow. Amen.

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⁶ Accessed on Facebook August 24, 2021. Marketing for Hippies, @axherdboy.

⁷ Acts 1:8

⁸ <https://awomensting.org/blog/ella-baker-believe-freedom-cannot-rest-comes/>