

THE PERFECT LAW OF LIBERTY

“Whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.” James 1:25.

There is an old tradition that tells us that James, who was probably the writer of this letter, the Lord’s half brother, continued in the practice of Jewish piety all his life. He was sur-named “the just.” He lived the life of a Naz-arite. He was even admitted into the sanctu-ary of the temple, and there spent much of his time in praying for the forgiveness of the peo-ple that, in the vivid language of the old writer, his knees were hard and worn like a camels’.

To such a man the Gospel would natu-rally present itself “a law,” which word ex-pressed the highest form of revelation with which he was familiar. To him the glory of Christ’s message would be that it was this per-fecting of an earlier utterance, moving on the same plane as it did, but infinitely greater.

Now that, of course, is somewhat differ-ent from the point of view from which for in-stance, Paul records the relation of the Gospel to the Law. To him they are rather antithesis. He conceived mainly of the Law as a system of outward observances, incapable of fulfill-ment, and valuable as impressing upon men the consciousness of sin.

But, though there is diversity, there is no contradiction any more than there is between the two pictures in a stereoscope, which united represent one solid reality. The two men simply regard the subject from slightly different angles. Paul would have said that the Gospel was the perfection of the Law. He does indeed say that by faith we do not make void, but establish the Law.

James would have said that the Law, in Paul’s sense, was a yoke of bondage, as in- deed he does say in my text. And that the Gos- pel is contrasted with the earlier revelation, and **is the perfect law of liberty.**

So the two men compliment, and do not contradict each other. In like manner, the ear- nest urging of work and insisting upon con- duct, which are the keynote of this letter, are no contradiction of Paul. The one writer be- gins at a later point than the other.

Paul is a preacher of faith, **but of faith which works by love.** James is a preacher of works, **but of works which are the fruit of faith.**

We have here three principles:

- **The perfect law of liberty.**
- **The doers of the perfect law of liberty.**
- **The blessedness of the doers of the per- fect law of liberty.**

First, the perfect law of liberty.

James calls it a law, because it is a Gospel that is authoritative, and a law of standard and rule for human conduct, a canon. In every part of the revelation of Divine Truth contained in the Gospel there is a direct moral and practical bearing.

No word of the New Testament is given to us only in order that we may know Truth, **but all in order that we may do it.** Every part of it palpitates with life, and is meant to regu- late conduct.

There are plenty of truths of which it does not matter whether a man believes them or not, in so far as his conduct is concerned.

Mathematical truth or scientific truth leaves conduct unaffected. But no one can be- lieve the principles that are laid down in the New Testament, and the Truths that are laid down in the Old Testament, and the Truths that are revealed and unveiled there, without their having a masterful grip upon his life and influencing all that he really is.

In the very central fact of the Gospel therein lies the most stringent rule of life. Je- sus Christ is the pattern, and from those gen- tle lips which say, “If ye love Me, keep My

commandments,” the Law sounds more imperatively than from all the thunder and trumpets of Sinai.

In the great act of redemption, which is the central fact of the New Testament revelation, there lies a law for conduct. God’s love redeeming us in the revelation of what we ought to be, and the cross, to which we look as the refuge from sin and condemnation is also the pattern for the life of every believer. “Be ye imitators of God, as dear children, and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us.”

A revelation, therefore of which every Truth, to the minutest fiber of the great web, has in it a directly practical bearing, a revelation which is all centered and focuses in the life which is example because it is deliverance. It is a revelation of which the vital heart is the redeeming act which sets before us the outlines of our conduct, and the model for our imitation is a law just because it is a Gospel.

Such thoughts as these are needful as a counterpoise to one-sided views that the thought of which would otherwise be disastrous. God forbid that the thought of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as primarily a message of reconciliation and pardon and providing a means of separation from the frightful consequences of sin, even separation from God, should ever be put in the background.

But where the very ardor and intensity of man’s recognition of these things as the first shape which Christianity assumes to sinful men, has sometimes lead, (and is always in possible danger of leading to), is putting all other aspects of the Gospel in the background.

When a preacher talks to some people about plain duties, and insists upon conduct and righteousness, they are ready to say, “He is not preaching the Gospel.” He is not preaching the Gospel if he does not present these duties and this practical righteousness as the fruit of faith, or if he presents them as the means of winning salvation.

If your conception of Christianity has not grasped it as being a stringent rule of life, you need to go to school, to the book of James, the

servant of God, and you then do not yet understand the message of his brother Paul.

The Gospel is a redemption, yes, God be thanked. Redemption is a law, a perfect law of liberty. Again this thought gives the necessary counterpoise to the tendency to substitute the mere intellectual grasp of Christian Truth for the practical doing of it. There will be plenty of orthodox Christians and theological professors and students who will find themselves, to their very great surprise, amongst the goats at last.

Not what we believe, **what we do**, is our Christianity. **Only the doing must be rooted in belief.**

In like manner, take this vivid conception of the Gospel as a law, as a counterpoise to the tendency to place Christianity in mere emotion and feeling. Fire is very good, but its best purpose is to get up steam which will drive the wheels of the engine. There is a vast deal of lazy selfishness masquerading under the guise of sweet and sacred devout emotion. **Not what we feel, but what we do, is our Christianity.**

Further notice that this law is **perfect law**.

James’ idea, I suppose, in that epithet, is not so much the completeness of the code, or the loftiness and absoluteness of the ideal which is set forth in the Gospel, as the relation between the law and its doer... he is stating the same thought of which the psalmist of old time had caught a glimpse, “The law of the Lord is perfect.” “When that which is perfect is come.” This perfect law of liberty.

Perfect is the law because it converts the soul, “makes wise the simple.” That is to say, the weakness of all commandment, whether it be the law of a nation, or the law of moral textbooks, or the law of conscience, or of public opinion, or the like, the weakness of all positive statue is that it stands there, over against a man, and points a stony finger to the stone tables, “Thou shalt.” “Thou shalt not,” but stretches out no hand to help us to keep the commandment.

It simply enjoins, “Say no,” and because it simply enjoins, it is weak, like the proclama-

tions of some discrowned king who has no army at his back to enforce them, and which flutter as waste paper on the barn doors, and to nothing to secure allegiance.

But says James, the law is perfect. Because it is more than law and transcends the simple function of command. **It not only tells us what to do, but it gives us the power to do it.** "Say no to drugs!" How? "Just say no!"

"Don't mess around!" Why? How? "Just don't, I say."

The world knows what it ought to do well enough. There is no need for Heaven to rend, and Divine voices to come to tell men what is right and wrong. They carry an all but absolutely sufficient guide as to that within their own minds. But there is need to bring them something which shall be more than commandment, which shall be both law and power, both the exhibition of duty and the gift of capacity to discharge it.

The Gospel brings power because it brings life.

"The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation." "If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness had been by the Law."

In the Gospel that desideratum is supplied. Here is the law which vitalizes and so gives power. The life which the Gospel brings will unfold itself after its own nature, and so produce the obedience which the law of the Gospel requires.

Therefore, says James, further, **this perfect law is freedom, liberty.** Of course, liberty is not exemption from commandment, but the harmony of will and commandment. Whosoever finds that which is his duty, is his delight, is enfranchised. We are set at liberty when we walk within the limits of that Gospel, and they who delight to do the laws are free in obedience from the tyranny of their own lusts, passions, inclinations; free from the domination of men and opinion and common customs, personal habits and traditions of men.

All those bonds are burnt in the fiery furnace of love into which they pass. Where they

walk transfigured and at liberty, because they keep the Law. Freedom comes from the reception into the soul of the life whose motions coincide with the commandments of the Gospel.

The burden that I carry carries me. The limits within which I am confined are merciful fences, the GRACE fences, put upon the edge of the cliff to keep the traveler from falling over and being dashed to pieces beneath.

Secondly, notice the doer of the perfect law of liberty.

James has a long prelude before he comes to the doing. Several things are required as preliminary:

The first step is, "looketh into the perfect law of liberty." The word used here is a very picturesque and striking one. Its force may be seen if I quote to you the other instances of its occurrences in the New Testament. It is used in the accounts of the resurrection to describe the attitude and action of Peter, John, and Mary as they "stooped down and looked into" the empty sepulchre.

In all these cases we have the translation "stooping and looking," both acts being implied in it. It is also used for Peter when he tells us that the "angels desire to look into" the mysteries of redemption. In which saying there may be some allusion to the silent, bending figures of the twin cherubim who with folded wings and fixed eyes, curved themselves above the mercy seat and looked down upon that mystery of propitiating love.

With such fixed and steadfast gaze we must contemplate the perfect law of liberty, if we are ever to be doers of the same. PARA KUPTO, bending forward, stooping to look into. Luke 24:12, John 20:5, 11, James 1:25, 1 Peter 1:12. Now that is the first requirement, looking.

The second one is "and continueth." The gaze must be, not only concentrated, but constant, if anything is to come of it. Old legends tell us that the looker into a magic crystal saw nothing at first, but as he gazed, there gradually formed themselves in the clear sphere filmy shapes, which grew firmer and more distinct until they stood plain. The raw hide

dipped into the vat with tanning in it, and, once pulled out again, will never be turned into leather.

Many of you do not give the motive and principles of the Gospel, which you say you believe, a chance of influencing you, because so interruptedly and spasmodically and at such long intervals, and for so few moments, do you gaze upon them. **Steadfast and continued attention is useful if we are to be doers of the Word.**

Practical applications.

Cultivate the habit, then of contemplation the central Truths of the Gospel, as the condition of receiving in vigor and fullness the life which obeys the commandment. There is no mystery about the way by which that new life is given to men. James tells us here in the immediate context, how it is. **He speaks of God. If His own will besetting us with the "Word of Truth."** "And the engrafted Word," which being engrafted, "is able to save your souls."

Get the Word, the principles of the Gospel, and the Truths of revelation, which are all enshrined and incarnated in Jesus Christ, into your minds, and the new life by continual believing contemplation of it, which is obedience, will surely spring.

But if you look at the perfect law of liberty of your salvation as seldom and as superficially and with as passing glances as so many of you expend upon it, no wonder that you are such weaklings as so many of you are, and that you find such a gulf between your uncircumcised inclinations and the commandment of the living God.

Cultivate also the habit of reflective meditation upon the Truths of the Word as giving you the pattern of duty in a concentrated and available form. It is of no use to carry about a copy of the statues at large in 20 folio volumes in order to refer to it when difficulties arise and crises come. We must have something a great deal more compendious and easy to reference than that. A man's cabin trunk, must not be as big as a house, and his

goods must be in small compass for his sea voyage.

We have in Christ Jesus, the statutes at large, codified, and put to a form which the poorest and humblest and busiest among us can apply directly to the sudden emergencies and surprising contingencies of daily life, which are always sprung upon us when we do not expect them and demand instantaneous decision. We have in Christ the pattern of conduct. But only those who have been accustomed to meditate upon Him, and on the Truths that flow from His life and death will find that the sword is ready when it is needed, and that the Guide is at their side when they are in perplexity.

Cultivate the habits of mediation on the Truths of the Gospel in order that the motives of conduct may be reinvigorated and strengthened. Remember that only by long and habitual abiding in the secret place of the Most High, and entertaining the thoughts of His infinite love to us as the continual attitude of our daily life shall we be able to respond to His love with the thankfulness which springs to obedience as a delight, and knows no joy like the joy of serving such a Friend.

These requirements being met, next comes the doing. There must precede all true doing of the law this gazing into it, steadfast and continued. We shall not obey the commandment except, first, we have received and welcomed the salvation. There must be, first faith, and then obedience. Only he who has received the Gospel in the love of it will find that the Gospel is the law which regulates his conduct. "Faith without works is dead." Non-productive works without faith are rootless flowers, or bricks hastily and incompletely huddled together with the binding straw.

Further, the text suggests that the natural crown of all contemplation and knowledge is practical obedience. **Make of all your creed deed.** Let everything you believe be a principle of action too, your creed, and translate it into agenda. And on the other hand, let every deed be informed by your creed. **Let no schism exist between what you are and what you believe.**

Thirdly, note the blessedness of the doers of the perfect law of liberty. There is an echo on the words of our text, of the beatitudes, and the sermon on the mount, the form in which the Gospel was possibly dearest to the apostle James. He uses the same word, "blessed."

Notice, that "in" and not "after," not as a reward for, but "blessed in" the deed. It is the saying of the psalmist over again, whose words we have in the former portion of this verse, who in the same great Psalm says, "In keeping Thy commandments there is great reward." The rewards of this law are not arbitrarily bestowed, separately from the act of obedience, by the will of the Judge, but the deeds of obedience automatically bring the blessedness.

This word is not so constituted as that outward rewards follow on inward goodness. Few of its prizes fall to the lot of the saints. **Men are so constituted as the obedience is its own reward. There is no delight so deep and true as the delight of doing the will of the Lord whom we love.** There is no blessedness like that of an increasing communion with God, and of the clearer perception of His will and mind which follow obedience as surely as the shadow does the sunshine. There is no blessedness like the glow of approving

conscience, the reflection of the smile on Christ's face.

They have the heart in close relationship and communion with the very Fountain of all good, and the will in harmony with the will of the best Beloved, to hear the voice that is dearest of all, ever saying, "This is the way, walk ye in it." To feel a spirit in my feet, impelling me upon that road, to know that all my petty deeds are made great, and my stained offerings hallowed by the altar on which they are honored to lie, and to be conscious of fellowship with the Friend of my soul increased by obedience, that is to taste the keenest joy and good of life. And he who is thus blessed in his deed ever fear that the blessedness shall be taken away, not sorrow though other joys be few and griefs be many. Do not begin your building at the roof, but put in the foundation deep in confession, change of mind, and faith. Then let every man take heed how he buildeth thereon.

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taken from
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