

John 8:31–33 (Common English Bible)

³¹ Jesus said to the Jews who believed in him, “You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teaching. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

³³ They responded, “We are Abraham’s children; we’ve never been anyone’s slaves. How can you say that we will be set free?”

2 Corinthians 3:1–3, 17–18 (CEB)

Are we starting to commend ourselves again? We don’t need letters of introduction to you or from you like other people, do we? ² You are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. ³ You show that you are Christ’s letter, delivered by us. You weren’t written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. You weren’t written on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

¹⁷ The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Lord’s Spirit is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ All of us are looking with unveiled faces at the glory of the Lord as if we were looking in a mirror. We are being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to the next degree of glory. This comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

James 1:19–27 (CEB)

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. ²¹ Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

²² You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves.

²³ Those who hear but don’t do the word are like those who look at their faces in a mirror. ²⁴ They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But there are those who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continue to do it. They don’t listen and then forget, but they put it into practice in their lives. They will be blessed in whatever they do.

²⁶ Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

We are a free people, born in freedom and born a second time to the freedom that is in Christ. But how will we use this freedom? What is this freedom for?

This week we begin a five-part series drawn from the book of James, written by Jesus’ half-brother who became a leader in the early church in Jerusalem. Since James was martyred in the early 60’s A.D., James’ teachings come from the first decades of the Jesus movement, before any of the gospels were written.

Though deeply theological, the letter of James doesn’t focus much on the nature or person of Jesus, but on what it means to live as disciples of Jesus. James, like Jesus, Paul, and the others insisted on holding together the tension between faith and how we live. In the words of the old hymn, we are to “trust and obey.” James has much to say about the doing that must characterize the authentic Christian life.

James and the “law of freedom”

We have just come out of a series on the Ten Commandments. We were reminded that God’s teachings throughout the Law of Moses boil down to two: love God and love others, the first tablet and the second tablet. Further, we learned that the Law was given

to the Israelites after God had rescued them, *after* their flight to freedom. Indeed, every year since the Exodus, Jews have gathered together at Passover to remember and renew their escape from slavery to the freedom given them by God.

Finally, we learned that God's Law, his instruction and teaching, was not given to the Israelites to test them, to oppress them, or to burden them. Most important, the Law was not arbitrary, but reflects the love and goodness of God throughout; the Law tells us as much about God as about ourselves. The law is not about bondage but about freedom – the freedom to be God's people, the freedom to love and to cherish, the freedom to worship and to serve.

The Mirror (v. 23-24)

There is a moment in James that takes a bit of explanation.

James writes, "Those who hear but don't do the word are like those who look at their faces in a mirror. They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like."

I don't know about you, but when I look in a mirror I don't walk away and forget what I look like.

However, in the ancient world, there were no mirrors as we know them. The best anyone could do was to use a piece of polished metal, but even that was a luxury for most people. Thus, many people went their whole lives with little idea what they actually looked like! Dwell on that for a minute . . . no idea what they looked like. Just another reminder that we can't simply read the Bible through our 21st century, western, urban, technology-obsessed eyes and leave it at that. We have to be teachable!

So James gets it just right. Those who only hear God's word and don't do God's work, get only a fleeting and soon forgotten impression of what an authentic Christian actually is.

Thus, James embeds his teachings in the "perfect law, the law of freedom." James doesn't have in mind replacing the Law of Moses given at Mt. Sinai, his point is that the Law has been fulfilled in and by Jesus. In Christ, we can clearly see what was always true because of "the word planted deep inside [us] – the very word that is able to save [us]" (1:21). This "word" encompasses more than Scripture, this "word" is the very Spirit of Christ who dwells in every believer.

It is important to grasp that James' emphasis on freedom was nothing new even to his fellow Jews who had become followers of Jesus, even as it was good news to the Gentiles who had newly discovered the joy that is the Lord. Here's some of the freedom story in brief.

A history of liberty

First, we have the Exodus, when God liberated the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. The Pharaohs had enslaved the descendants of Abraham, subjecting them to difficult, forced labor. God saved his people from Pharaoh, leading them to freedom on the far side of the Red Sea. Ever since, Jews across the globe have celebrated the Passover, a freedom party, remembering and recreating the time when God had brought them to freedom. They were to be a people subject only to God. But that wasn't all, according to God's Law, every fifty years the people were to celebrate Jubilee by freeing all slaves owned by the Hebrews. A few centuries later, when the people wanted an

earthly king, God warned them that kings were takers, that kings would lead them in tyranny, not liberty (see 1 Samuel 8).

Isaiah chapters 40-66 were written during the Israelites' exile in Babylon, when it seemed they had lost everything as a consequence of their own abandonment of God. It was as if someone had tossed them in jail as punishment for their sin and thrown away the key. Yet, the prophet brought the Good News that they would be rescued, that God would one day anoint someone who would throw open the prison doors and set the captives free. This anointed one would bring freedom and liberty to the oppressed. (see esp. the opening verses of Isaiah 40 and 61). Tellingly, when Jesus begins his public

ministry he rises to read from the Scriptures and opens to scroll to Isaiah 61, for Jesus would prove to be God's anointed. Jesus would be the long-awaited bringer of liberty.

Moving on to the Gospel of John . . . The context for today's passage is sin. Jesus is the light of the world. Those who trust in him will know the truth and that truth will set them free. Free from what? Free from sin, the beast that threatens to overwhelm us, destroying our relationships with God and one another. Some of those listening to Jesus are mistakenly trying to understand Jesus through the prism of the Exodus. They had long ago been freed from Pharaoh, hadn't they? But Jesus has another meaning of freedom in mind – liberation from slavery and sin so that his disciples could be free to love God and neighbor, free from their bondage to sin. Free to be free.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul, like Jesus, takes up the cause of freedom. Here, it is the Law that is in view. The Law was given to God's people so that they could learn how to live in loving relationship with God and with each other, for the essence of the Law, Jesus says, is to love God and love one another. Yet, the Law could not defeat Sin. It simply lacked the power to liberate. Therefore, the Israelites, no less than we, proved unable simply to love. Thus, Paul writes, the Spirit of God has written love on the hearts of believers, freeing them from the pursuit of the Law as their Savior – it is Jesus who has saved them.

Finally, we return to James who twice speaks of the "law of liberty" in his letter. What does he mean? To reiterate, James is speaking of what we might call the "law of the kingdom of God." In 2:8, he calls this the "royal law." And what is the law in the kingdom of God? It is the law of love, the law that is grounded in love of God and neighbor, i.e. in the two tablets. James quotes Leviticus 19:18 specifically, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The law of liberty is the law of love – love and freedom are bound tightly together. Even God is bound by this law of love and liberty. Even God cannot force us to love him, for then it would not be love. God can't bribe us or threaten us; all God can do is to free us from whatever hinders our ability to love. But love itself . . . well, it *must* be freely given.

Freedom from or freedom for?

Too many people hear the words "freedom" and think only of what they are free *from*. And certainly in this world that is great joy in being free from oppression, poverty, injustice, hatred, and so on. That is God's hope for us.

But the larger question is how we will use our freedom. God has freed us from sin and death for a reason – we are free *for* what?

As we'll see over the coming weeks, James wants us to be doers of the word, not mere hearers of it. James refuses to allow us to divide ourselves into pieces, a secular piece here, a sacred piece there. For we are no longer our own, we are Christ's and that must be the truth that guides every moment of our day, every step of our way.

Luke Timothy Johnson, a theologian always worth reading, wants us to grasp that James' letter is guided by an over-arching question – do we really believe that we have been born anew in Christ, that the word dwells in us, that all our doings must be guided by this truth. Do we really, truly believe?

The real challenge of chapter 1 to the readers of James is whether this view of reality is really one they "know" (1:3, 19) and seek to live by (1:22–25), or whether they are "self-deceived" (1:22, 26) by trying to live with a divided consciousness (1:8). Do they really believe that those who endure in faith until death will receive a crown that is life (1:12)? If so, then they can, with simple hearts, dispose of themselves joyfully in generous giving. But if they do not, then it makes sense for them to be self-protective, to husband their resources. Do they really think that God's implanted word is able to save their lives (1:21)? If they do, then they will

turn in every circumstance to pray for the wisdom so to live by that word (1:5). But if they do not, then they should abandon humility and meekness in favor of a “human anger” by which they can gain security for themselves. It is almost as though, before developing the implications of these convictions, James insists that readers pause and ask: Do we really believe this? Is this the understanding of reality to which we are committed?¹

More on the “Law of Freedom” (from George Stulac)

First, this is one of the phrases in James indicating that he is using the term law (nomos) with a connotation different from Paul’s in Galatians or Romans. Paul would write about the law as an avenue by which one might attempt to attain a standing of righteousness before the holy God. In this respect, law would have to be treated in contrast to faith. James, however, is speaking of moral law as the deeds of the righteous life that God desires. The teachings of Jesus would especially be the perfect law to which James refers. . . . By living according to this word, or law, they could live in true freedom in spite of their oppressors, for they would have the freedom to enter the kingdom of heaven and to live righteous lives. This theme in James can be seen to flow readily from Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:17–20 and 7:21, 24.

Second, the emphasis on freedom shows James’s integration of his Old Testament Jewish tradition and the teachings of Jesus. The Old Testament certainly emphasized the blessing inherent in obeying God’s laws. Jesus then emphasized his commitment to fulfill the law (Mt 5:17) and to give freedom (Jn 8:36). For James now, the perfect law that gives freedom is the very word of which he has been speaking. His warning against being “deceived” (with two different verbs in 1:16 and 1:22) is motivated by his assurance that we have, in contrast to deception, a real “word of truth” from God. This word of truth is a “perfect gift ... from above,” for it gives us birth, it saves us and it gives us freedom. So it is again described as perfect in 1:25. Especially for people who tend to think of God’s word as a collection of burdensome, guilt-producing demands, James is a marvelous corrective model. He exhibits the admiration for the perfection of God’s will and the delight in doing God’s will which are to be normative for God’s people according to both the Old Testament (Ps 19:7–11) and the New (Mt 7:21; Jn 14:15).¹

1. Stulac, G. M. (1993). James (Jas 1:22). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Jesus has revealed to us that God is inherently relational – one God who is a loving community of three persons in God’s very being. This God of love created us to love. Do you agree that for love to be love it must be freely given? If so, how does necessary freedom influence your understanding of God, of your relationship with God, and of your relationship with others?
2. The Exodus, the pivotal story of salvation in the Old Testament, is a story of freedom – personal and political. How does this freedom story shape the rest of the biblical story? Why do you think that Jesus chose to bring his ministry to its confrontational climax during Passover week, which was one big freedom party?
3. Given God’s creation of free beings and his rescuing of his people from slavery and Jesus’ rescuing of us from the tyranny of sin, do you think that God hopes for us to live in liberty in all the varied spheres of our lives? Are there any spheres of our lives, in which God would be ok with oppression rather than freedom?
4. Finally, if God has created us to be free, with a right to liberty, then what do you think God hopes we would do with this freedom? The really important question is not so much freedom *from* but freedom *for*. For what? The freedom to do what? Be specific!

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson. (1994–2004). The Letter of James. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 12, p. 190). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| <p>Monday Psalm 146 Praise God for he is the one who sets the prisoners free (v. 7).</p> | <p>Tuesday Leviticus 25 The Jubilee years. Every 50 years, all slaves owned by the Hebrews were to be freed. Also, the Hebrews were not to enslave one another.</p> |
| <p>Wednesday Hosea 2:1-15 After pronouncing judgment on the adulterous Israel, God says that he will take her (Israel) into the wilderness and there God will “allure” her and “speak tenderly to her.” Even God cannot force his people to live him and still call it love!</p> | <p>Thursday Acts 13:16-41 One of Paul’s speeches. Note v. 39. Jesus has freed us from sin; the Law of Moses could not.</p> |
| <p>Friday 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Paul answers a question about whether it is ok for the believers to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols. They are to be careful not to misuse the liberty that they have been given.</p> | <p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p> |

