

"True Freedom Leads to Willing Obedience" James 1:18–27

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[0:00] It's actually interesting. The sermon I picked, just by chance, I didn't mean to do this, was I actually preached this! exactly within a day of a year ago. When I was a curate in Port Perry, we were going through the book of James, and this is the sermon that I preached a year ago.

So I'm looking forward to doing it again. So we're going to get into it. And the way we're going to start this is that I'm going to talk about American politics.

And so now I just ask for mercy. I'm just going to touch on it very briefly, because it draws a good point. Pretty much a year ago, Trump gave, I know that name can cause fear, anger, anxiety for some people.

Just hearing that name, Trump, but we're just going to go into it. In his inauguration speech, the day that he was sworn in as president for the second time, second term of the United States, in his speech, he called that day Freedom Day, as he went on in his speech.

He called it, this is the Freedom Day. This is the day of the new era for American people. See, most would roll their eyes at that statement. Like, oh, that's just Trump being Trump.

[1:13] But the thing that's interesting, and I remember this, through the campaigns of both Trump and his party with Vance, and then also Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, is that both parties promoted this narrative and this ideology of freedom.

Then just Trump, so happened to one, so he was able to say it in his speech that this is Freedom Day. But the other party would have done the same thing. Because a closer look at these freedom narratives that both these parties promised is always through the censoring and oppressing of certain people groups, depending who's in power it happens.

And this is also the same case for our own political climate here in Canada. I was a photojournalist, I've probably mentioned it before, in Ottawa for over a decade before I transferred into ministry and I felt the call.

And I spent a lot of time on Parland Hill, just because it's Ottawa, so you spend a lot of time taking photos of political things going on. And I was able to witness the fall of a party and then also the rise of the next party.

And they promised the same narratives of freedom, but at the expense of other people. Western culture, in particular, is full of narratives promising freedom.

[2:39] Freedom from your old self. Freedom to become a better you. Freedom from anything that holds you back. It's the air that we breathe.

We breathe it in every day. We see it every day. Live your best life now. Live what you got. A quick walk through any shopping mall, you'll see all these different narratives.

You get bombarded with it. That promise you the good life if you buy their product. I remember this a while back. I saw this commercial for an ad.

And I knew the actor within it, within the commercial, so I ended up watching it. And what, in this ad, this actor had the perfect family.

Everyone was happy. Everyone was very smiley, having a good time. He was tanned. He was built. He had the perfect man bun. He was promoted as the manly man, the family man.

[3:39] Nothing could go wrong. He gave off the appearance of success. But the thing that was interesting about this commercial, right after all

this, about 30 seconds in, it zooms in on the logo of his pants.

And he does a voiceover. And he says, without my Carhartt pants, I can never have anything like this without them. I need them. And right there, I clicked off.

See, everything in this life promises freedom. But it's just freedom in different ways. So why bring all this up?

James is writing to Jewish Christians amongst the surrounding area. In his letter, he begins it saying, James, a servant of God, of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the 12 tribes in the dispersion, greetings.

Now what that means is that he is writing to Christians who have been scattered around the surrounding area of Jerusalem and beyond. He is writing to Christians, Jewish Christians, who are facing persecution for their beliefs.

[4:51] They are facing suffering and isolation for their beliefs. They are being bombarded with narratives that offer freedom and a better life. They would be living in these places that have temples, that if you go to these temples, they promise that if you worship their God, you will have a good life.

Whether it is through the God of fertility, the God of success, of money, all that keeps going, depending on the temple. They're being bombarded. The majority of them are poor economically. Everyone around them seems to be enjoying life more than them. And some of you may be feeling you can relate to some of this, that you look around and you see people having a good life, but when you profess your faith to people, it almost appears that your life is not going well.

I know I can relate to this when I talk about it with my family and my friends. They look at you differently. So that doesn't sound like good freedom. The Christian life. So how are we, as followers of Jesus, as our Lord and Savior, to make sense of this?

I'm sure the scattered Jewish Christians would have been thinking the same thing. What is going on? What is this happening to me? I thought, being a Christian, I was supposed to be free.

[6:14] I was supposed to have freedom. Isn't that what was spoken to me, told? See, we're going to look at this, and James shows that there's another way to experience true freedom, or we can call it liberation, as it says later, liberty.

Well, let's look at God's Word. If you haven't already, we're looking at James, the letter of James that comes after the book of Hebrews. If you have your Bible, it would be very helpful, because then you can see what happens before and what happens after.

And we're going to look at James 1, verses 18 to 27. And we need to start in verse 18, to understand the flow of the letter, because it's hard to understand the flow when you just pop in to certain books as we go.

See, the reformer Martin Luther, a very famous man, was not a fan of the book of James. He said it resembled too closely, too close to the works of a works-based religion.

He was not a fan of it. He didn't want it in the Bible. And then other people in this debate would say it contradicts Paul's writings and his main thrust of justification by faith.

[7:21] Many would say that it contradicts the book of Romans. And you'll see that as Daniel preaches through the book of Romans, that it points directly to justification by faith, but also by works, as James talks about.

A closer reading shows us this, and we're going to flesh it out. A better way to understand this is that Paul, when he speaks, is more cerebral. He's more philosophical in his teaching and how he writes.

And then James is more like a how-to guide, how to live out the Christian life. James has been compared to the New Testament Proverbs.

We have the Old Testament Proverbs, and then you have the New Testament Proverbs. James is compared to that. But we see, as we look, three things from this passage, and we're going to look at it.

And it's this. True freedom leads to willing obedience. Three points, practical points. How to listen, how to be a doer, what does it look like?

[8:21] Because true freedom leads to willing obedience. Let's look. Verses 18 to 21. Of his own will, God, he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Know this, my beloved brothers. Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

See, the first thing we see here in verse 18 is that God is working. God has brought us forth by the word of truth.

And then in 21, it says the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. Before James moves into the practical part of this passage, he wants to make clear that the Christian life is one of true grace, that it is truly given.

[9:36] It's not something that you earn. It doesn't say bluntly, justification by faith, but it makes it quite obvious. It is given by grace. Faith is given by grace.

Justified by the word of truth. If you recall John's gospel, he begins his gospel by saying the word made flesh, the word of truth. Justified by faith through grace, freely given.

This is how we are to view ourselves as we move into this part of what it looks like to be a doer of the word. Saved through faith. In James chapter 2, verse 17, he says this, Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

This is where the debates come from, that they think that they contradict each other, but they go hand in hand. Imagine someone who says, I believe I'm a doctor, but doesn't do the schooling, the work, to learn how to become a doctor, to learn the anatomy or the anatomy of a human body, how to do it, what medicines to give.

Would you go to them? Would you believe that they are true doctors? Or think of a lifeguard who doesn't know how to swim, doesn't know how to do CPR.

[10:54] Would you want them guarding the beach your kids are at? Would you believe that they are a true lifeguard? No. The second thing we see in these verses is listening to God's word.

Remember, James is writing to Christians Christians who are being put through intense trials. They're being squeezed. They're being oppressed. Look again at verse 19.

Know this, my beloved brothers. Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Now this is easier said than done. Quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. This is easier said than done. But why do this?

Why not jump on things if we're accused of things? It's because it produces the righteousness of God. See, these Christians, the Jewish Christians that are scattered, as we talked about at the beginning, is that they are facing immense persecution, immense suffering.

[12:01] But James here tells them that amidst the suffering, amidst this, be quick to hear, but slow to speak, and slow to anger. So I'm going to use a cliché illustration.

Diamonds, they're produced through intense, slow pressure of the pressure of the earth plates coming together, and it takes many years. See, the Christian life is one of this as well.

It is one of slow listening to God's word, but the mark of a Christian is one who shows these traits in public life. No matter the circumstances, God's word slowly shapes us through the pressures of life. This is what James is getting at here, is that when we experience these things in life, we need to be slow to react, slow to speak, slow to anger.

And he continues in verse 21, when he talks about, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

[13:11] James is talking about this idea of an old identity and a new identity, that when you live a Christian life, is that you have to put off the old identity and put on the new identity, but it's done through looking at God's word, not through our own means.

New citizens, the implanted word, it's put within you. It's not something that you do yourself. See, true freedom leads to willing obedience.

But how are we to be a doer of the word? How does this play out? See, James now moves into the thrust of his argument. If you only listen and never change, you're not truly saved.

Think about in marriage. For those of you who are married here, or if you're in a relationship, or even just with a friend, if you only listen to them, but never act, it's a bad thing.

If you only act, but never listen, that is also a bad thing. You need to have both. If you don't have both, the relationship falls apart. See, it's the same thing with God's word.

[14:24] You can be a good listener of the word, know all the answers, but never a doer, and not be saved, as James points out. You can also be a doer of the word, but never listen to it, and never be saved.

You must have both. This is what James is getting at here, of how to be a doer, as he talks about. Look at verse 22. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

For if anyone is a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself, and goes away, and at once forgets what he is like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets, but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Something that's so nice about James when you read through it is that it's practical, and he gives many illustrations, which is very helpful. I find it very helpful. He uses illustrations of waves being tossed back and forth for those who are being tossed through different ideologies.

[15:38] He talks about flowers and fields being scorched away, passing away when the sun rises. And here we have someone looking intently in a mirror. If you think about it, most will have a mirror at their front door, or in their bedroom when they're getting dressed.

And you check yourself to make sure if you have any food or anything on your face, or if your outfit is proper. James is using this to illustrate where do you find your moral teaching.

Because remember, he's talking to Christians who are bombarded by ideologies and narratives promising freedom. Where do we find it? Where do we find our moral teaching?

Do we find it in ourselves, our self-determination, or do we find it within the culture around us? Or do we find it in God's word, and are we doers of his word? See, if we look again at verse 25, he says, but the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets, but a doer who acts, he will be blessed.

See, there's three things that go on here. It's the looks, read and listen, persevere through trials and life, and doer who acts. He lists it out.

[16:56] See, when we read God's word, when we look at it, when we listen to it and meditate on it, it is a mirror that points back at us and shows us things that we need to put off, the daily self of putting things off.

It shows us, it encourages us as well. See, the perfect law, the law of liberty, what is that? Jesus, in Sermon on the Mount, he talks about how he is the law.

He is the fulfillment of the law. See, we find the example of Christ, of Jesus, to reflect on, to meditate on, who points at us and shows us what we need to put off.

See, moral law is impossible to do perfect. It shows us our need. In the Old Testament, there's the law of Moses that James refers to. And this law is impossible to keep.

But God gave the law through Moses to show the need for the people to cling to him and not to people. But they fail at it. See, we are liberated through Jesus dying on the cross.

[18:04] We're given freedom through that act. His spirit enters into us. Jesus is the perfect law. Because true freedom leads to willing obedience.

But point three, what does it look like? What does it look like? Look with me at verses 26 and 27. If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

something that is so important within the Christian walk as James points out is controlled speech.

Later on, there's a section in chapter three called, it's titled Taming the Tongue.

And this has got to be one of the hardest things to do for all of us is to tame the tongue. He compares it to the tongue as something that sets off a forest fire, a blaze.

[19:15] He compares it to a flame that makes a massive forest fire. There's this time I was on a canoe trip when I was a canoe guide in Algonquin Park and a spark went up from the fire.

It's a little spark. And because it was so dry, it lit the forest part on fire and we had to scramble to get this forest fire put out. And it started to go through the root system but we managed to get it taken out.

But it happened so quick. And that can happen with speech. See, James talks about this. Our tongues are small but they can cause great fires within our lives and other people's lives. James is telling us not to tear people down, not to do crude joking, not to live a life unstained from this world. And we're to care for the oppressed and the poor.

It's interesting because James is talking to those who are oppressed and poor. Those who are marginalized. To care for the marginalized. And we are called to do this ourselves.

[20:18] We are called to seek them out. And then it says to be unstained from the world. Now this can mean many things to many people. And it's our job to listen to God's word to find out what that means.

But here, in this part, James is talking about economic indifference between the rich and the poor. See, the thing, I think I've mentioned it before, the thing that is so interesting about church, about coming to church, is that we all come from different walks of life.

Some people have money, some people don't have money or are in between. But we get to come together and worship the Lord. We get to be brothers and sisters in Christ through the risen Lord and the spirit within us.

And James is pointing at this. People with money are not to look down at people without money. And people without money are not to scoff at those who have money. The church setting is a beautiful example of this.

And James points it out. See, to reiterate the points, true freedom leads to willing obedience of God's word.

[21:26] Freedom by faith in the cross. Freedom by listening to God's word. Freedom by doing God's word through loving obedience. A critique of Christianity often is that, is that, oh, you have to follow all these rules.

All these things are heaped upon you and you can be okay with God. But it's not that. See, it's through the gift of faith when we reflect on this free gift that's been given to us by a loving father that we cannot help but act out what God's word says.

By resting in the finished work of the cross and listening and living out God's word, we can experience true freedom. All other narratives and ideologies rise and fall but the risen Lord will never fall, will never fail you, will never leave you as anything, everything else will.

Whether it's, you're following a narrative of self-determination or a narrative of following the right rules, both will leave you empty.

But the gospel pushes through that, both sides. The gospel is the true freedom and it's a free gift. Sam Alberry, a very famous author and apologist, has a really good quote on this passage in his commentary and he says this and this is where I'll end.

[23:00] Obedience in God's word is never simply mandated nor vaguely beneficial. It is transformational for following God's word changes us and this is what this is what James is getting at here is that when we follow God's word and submit to it our lives become transformed through the working of the gospel of the spirit within us.