

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: July 23, 2017  
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“FREEDOM AND IDENTITY”**

James 1:22-27

- Christ Jesus said, **“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,”** John 8:32.
  - ? Why, then, are so many Christians *not* free?
    - Why are so many not free for sexual holiness? Not free to hold money and possessions loosely? Not free to love the other, the stranger, the enemy?
    - Why are so many ruled by resentment? Dominated by fear? Driven by egotism?
    - {Eph 2:8} As a teenager and young adult, I testified that I was saved **“by grace”** – and all the while, I lived in terror that Holy God would not accept me. I felt compelled to try to make myself worthy – even as I saw that it was an impossible task. I knew the truth *and* I was not free.
      - I am no longer that miserable wretch! I am free!
      - Even so, I sometimes fall back into the old ways.
      - There are moments – hours, days – when I think and act like a slave to fear, to shame, to sin.
      - ? Why are so many of us *not* free?
      - ? How can we live in greater freedom?
  - Please turn to James 1. In verse 25, James speaks of **“the perfect law that gives freedom.”**
    - He tosses off the phrase, then moves right along.
    - But we need to stop here for a moment.
    - “The perfect law that gives freedom.”**

It sounds strange, doesn't it? **“The perfect law that gives freedom.”**

Doesn't the law set boundaries? Doesn't it constrain us? Doesn't it limit what we can do?

It might amuse me to shout 'Fire!' in a crowded theater. The law prohibits it.

It might make sense to me to shoplift an item that I need but cannot afford. The law prohibits it.

I might be able to rationalize killing a criminal who has done unspeakable things. The law prohibits it.

? Isn't the law the polar opposite of liberty? Nevertheless, James states that it **“gives freedom.”**

James is not talking about the law of the land, he is talking about the commandments of heaven. They are **“perfect,”** for YHWH who established them is impeccable in his being and righteous in his actions.

{Catechism} We affirm that **“the Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, [are] the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.”** Amen? Amen!

? But does it inevitably set us free?

? Is knowledge of Scripture always liberating?

My youthful bondage was terrible. At no point during those years was I biblically illiterate.

Knowledge of Scripture does not automatically liberate us. In my case, intellectual comprehension puffed up my ego and made me *less* free.

**“The truth will set you free.”**

? Why are so many Christians *not* free? How can **“The perfect law [give us] freedom”**?

■ Let's put James' description of **"The perfect law that gives freedom"** in context. Verses 22-25:

<sup>22</sup> **Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.** <sup>23</sup> **Those who listen to the word but do not do what it says are like people who look at their faces in a mirror** <sup>24</sup> **and, after looking at themselves, go away and immediately forget what they look like.** <sup>25</sup> **But those who look into the perfect law that gives freedom and continue in it – not forgetting what they have heard but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do.**

- Emancipation does not inevitably follow knowledge. As the Lord Jesus says in John 8:31-32, <sup>31</sup> **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.** <sup>32</sup> **Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."**

- ★ The critical catalyst by which **"the perfect law ... gives freedom"** is human obedience. Those who **"do what [the word] says"** **"will be blessed."** **"The perfect law"** will give them **"freedom."**

The converse is equally true: **"Those who listen to the word but [fail to] do what it says"** are self-deceived. It is implied that they won't **"be blessed."** **"The perfect law"** won't liberate them.

‽ Aren't we right back where we started? Isn't James claiming that we are saved by good works, thereby making the law our oppressor?

That is one way to interpret his thinking on human action. It is not the only way.

What if James does not contradict the teaching of salvation by grace through faith presented by Paul, but complements it? Might not his approach address aspects of the doctrine that Paul does not tackle?

- Let's take another look at verses 23-24: **"Those who listen to the word but do not do what it says are like people who look at their faces in a mirror** <sup>24</sup> **and, after looking at themselves, go away and immediately forget what they look like."**

📖 The phrase translated **"what they look like"** has layers of meaning. It refers to bodily appearance, yet it literally means **"what sort he"** or she is, {KJV} **"what manner of man he [is],"** what kind of woman she is.

On the surface, James paints the comical image of someone instantly forgetting their physical countenance. But beneath that is a tragic figure, the person who cannot even remember *who they are*.

Their forgetfulness is not due to a medical condition like chemo brain or brain damage or Alzheimer's. It is the result of their failure to act upon the word of God.

Hearing someone read, teach, or preach the Bible; reading it yourself; singing it, memorizing it, studying it, or meditating on it – taking it in by any means – then not responding with practical obedience, causes us to forget who we are as God's people. The lack of action triggers spiritual amnesia, so that we forget our identity.

? Does that sound crazy or overstated?

Consider this: immediately after declaring that we are saved by grace through faith and not by good works, Paul adds: **“we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”** (Ephesians 2:10).

This is not either/or, it is both/and. We are not saved *by* good works; we are saved *for* good works. Good works are not the *means* of salvation; apart from good works, our salvation *lacks meaning*.

{Mt 7:21} Right deeds are so important we have to ask: am I saved without them? Messiah cautions: **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven.”**

Is it going too far to say that good works are the *measure* of salvation? I do not think so.

☑ {Mt 7:16} Think about it this way: **“Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?”** Obviously not! *Grapevines* give grapes. *Fig trees* yield figs. It’s what they do, because it is what they are.

{Mt 7:16} That explains why we can **“recognize them” “by their”** action of bearing a particular **“fruit.”** It is a matter of identity.

When Christ Jesus uses this imagery in Matthew 7 he is talking about people, not plants. We don’t produce edible fruit; we do generate deeds.

Our deeds are the sign and the substance of who we are. If we are Christ Followers, if we know who we are,

then our actions will be consistent with Scripture. We will obey **“the perfect law.”**

Is effort required? Absolutely. A vine must expend energy and resources to produce grapes.

Does this requirement of effort put us into bondage? Absolutely not! A grapevine is freest, is most *itself*, when it yields fruit.

✈ This the crucial difference between legalistic bondage and fruitful liberty: In legalism, we struggle against our inmost self ({Rom 6:6} the **“old self,”** which is a **“slave to sin”**) to earn God’s approval; in fruitfulness, we cooperate with our inmost self ({II Co 5:7} the **“new creation,”** which serves righteousness) in response to God’s approval. It is a matter of identity.

■ James wraps it up in verses 26-27:

<sup>26</sup> **Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceived themselves, and their religion is worthless.** [It is hollow, futile rubbish!] <sup>27</sup> **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.**

James is reiterating that *right being* (keeping **“oneself from being polluted”**) cannot be separated from *right doing* (keeping **“a tight rein”** on the tongue, caring for orphans, helping widows, for example). Not only is this the **“Religion that God our Father**

**accepts,” it is the way to live freely since “those who look into the perfect law that gives freedom and continue in it – not forgetting what they have heard but doing it – [are] blessed.”**

Christ Jesus promised: **“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”**

? Why, then, are so many of us *not* free?

As a youth I knew the truth, and I was in bondage. I struggled against my inmost self to earn God’s approval. I was not free for genuine goodness. I was as slave to fear, to shame, to pride.

Too many believers suffer this way.

? How can we live in freedom?

The key to emancipation is straightforward: **“look into the perfect law that gives freedom and” “Do what it says”** – not in a legalistic fashion, but in cooperation with our inmost self in response to God’s approval of us in Christ Jesus.

It is a matter of identity.

James 1:22-27 is the word of the Lord.