

THE LAW THAT SETS YOU FREE

"Obedience is the road to Freedom."

—C. S. Lewis

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. 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. Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the Word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does (James 1:19-25).

James has been writing about the "Word of Truth," our only sure defense against the devil. This, "you know," he continues. But it's never enough to merely know the Word. We must "listen (to it)" and "do what it says."

Here James enjoins the necessity of response. The difference made by the Word is the difference it makes in us, but for it to make any difference at all, we must decide whether we will receive it with humility and enjoy its fruit, or place ourselves in opposition to it.

The point James makes is complementary to Jesus' parable of the sower and the seeds (Matthew 13:1-9). The seed is the Word that is "planted" in us. If we are good soil—soft and yielding it will bear fruit spontaneously. If we do not receive the Word it will go some other place and find root in someone else, happily doing what it is intended to do—produce fruit. We will however, have disturbed ourselves. We will have become unsound—quick to anger, full of neurotic aggression.

The word James uses, translated "angry," suggests an ambient (in contrast to transient) anger. Archbishop Richard Trench defines it as "a settled habit of mind." It is deep-seated hostility and bitterness of soul.

Odd isn't it, that when we will not "do" the Word—when we see our sin mirrored on its pages and walk away defiant, unrepentant, unchanged—we tend to degenerate into acrimony and scorn (*cp.*, Psalm 1:1). That's because there is no moral stasis. We're either becoming more gentle and gracious, or more angry and embittered. There is, as philosophers say, no *tertium quid*—no third thing.

The way to grow in grace is to be "quick to listen"—hear what God has to say. That's an idea he sets in contrast to being "slow to speak (talk)," *i.e.*, chatter on about God's Word—analyze it, dissect it, abstract it, all the while building walls of pride and reason so the heart can remain independent. "Saying and not doing," as you may know, is one of James' dominant themes.

What James is concerned with here is the tendency of those of us who take the Bible straight to approach it as an object of mere intellectual interest—to study it assiduously, to talk about it incessantly, but do nothing with the data we collect. This James says, is like gazing into a mirror, seeing dirt on our faces, but choosing to do nothing about it.

C. S. Lewis has this sort of person in mind when he has his senior demon, Screwtape, give the following advice

to his nephew, Wormwood:

The great thing is to prevent his (Wormwood's new Christian client) doing anything. As long as he does not convert it into action, it does not matter how much he thinks about this new repentance. Let the little brute wallow in it. Let him, if he has any bent that way, write a book about it; that is often an excellent way of sterilizing the seeds which the Enemy plants in a human soul. Let him do anything but act. No amount of piety in his imagination and affections will harm us if we can keep it out of his will.

The problem is that the more we keep the Word out of our will the more theoretical, abstract and distant God himself becomes. Then terrible things begin to happen to us: our hearts begin to harden (because un-lived truth always brutalizes us), coldness sets in and eventually bitterness overwrites our souls.

Truth does call for discussion and understanding, but not as much as we think. There is an order in the way God reveals truth and that order is inviolate: he speaks; we obey; he explains—maybe.

It is simply not true that we must understand a text before we can obey it. God is not obligated to explain anything to us and there are some things he will never be able to explain until we get to heaven and have his pure heart. We must obey whether we understand or not. We must put an end to our garrulous, restless, strident, argumentative quibbling about God's Word and "humbly accept" it—bow before each word in humble submission.

T. S. Eliot wrote,

You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to *kneel*.

Note James' order: we must rid ourselves of "all moral filth and evil." "Moral filth" is anything that is unbecoming. (The word is translated "shabby" in James 2:2). "Evil" is a generic term for anything ugly and defiling that "entwines itself" (the meaning of "prevalent") around our souls and entangles us.

James is not insisting that we set ourselves right before God can set us right. That would be tautology and bad theology, the worst sort of legalism. No, James is concerned here with a *disposition*, a fundamental willingness to put off anything that defiles our bodies, souls or spirits.

What James means is this: if we find ourselves reading the Word and unchanged by it, it may be that there is some unwillingness in us to let God repair everything that is unworthy or wrong. Unreadiness and resistance tie God's hands.

What is the solution? To "humbly accept the Word," to drop our defensive postures, to read with a readiness to obey so the seed can germinate in the soil of our souls.

God can then use his Word to probe and delve into our pride, avarice, greed, hateful thoughts, resentful grudges and indifference to human need. He can disinter the buried secrets and dark thoughts in us that so deeply defile us. He can speak to every harmful habit, every bad attitude, every troubling perspective, every destructive way of relating to others. He can begin to deal with all evil, malignant attitudes and actions—if we are willing to relinquish them. If we put ourselves in God's hands, the truth will set us free.

That's why James calls the Word "the perfect law that gives freedom." Freedom is not the power to do as we *want*—that's the worst sort of slavery—but the power to do as we *should*. There is a magic in the Word (it is white magic) that sets us free to be what we ought to be. Those who look intently into Christ's perfect law and make up their minds to do it, "will be blessed in their doing" (1:25). God's Spirit will enrich and empower us to obey. Not all at once but little by little our lives will be filled with beauty and grace. We are being transformed into the likeness of our Lord. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," Jesus assures us, "for they *will*

be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6).

What I'm saying is this: the greatest enjoyment of the fruitfulness of the Word is available to those who interfere with it least. The Word will do its work if we receive it with an "honest and good heart" (Luke 8:15). Those willing to cooperate with God—who will let him do whatever he wants to do, however and whenever he wants to do it—will yield a bumper crop of righteousness. God wills us whole and happy, and it will happen, if only we don't get in the way.

This sentiment is of a piece with what James has been saying all along: God's sole intent is to make us full and complete. It's not that judgment falls on us if we fail to make the proper response to his Word; it's rather that we miss out on all the good God has in mind for us.

For a plant, the failure to bear fruit is not a punishment visited upon it, but an unhappy departure from the purpose for which it was created. So it is with us. Resistance to God's Word means that we miss out on the very purpose for which we were made—our freedom, our fruitfulness, our fullness.

Here's the way I look at it: if I make a deficient response to the Law of Liberty I have not failed to live up to some arbitrary set of rules God made up and handed down. I have failed to live up to my identity and destiny as a man. That is my tragedy.

o What do you hear the Word saying to you today? Are you willing to "humbly accept" it?

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