

What Did Jesus Say About It?

James 1:19-27

I am fascinated by James' use of the phrase, the Law of Liberty. Here in James 1, the admonition is to lay aside all filthiness... and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls. We are to be "doers of the word and not hearers only." We are to avoid being the kind of person who hears the word and then fails to practice it for, "he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does." So the word is called the "perfect law of liberty" but what does James specifically mean by this phrase? Is this James' pet name for the word of God in general, the Old Testament Law, or something else?

He also uses the phrase in chapter 2. The chapter begins, "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality." The specific problem was that the churches were treating the rich and poor differently when they came to church. They were honoring the rich and disrespecting the poor. This was showing partiality and was a violation of "the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ." James continued his argument by showing that practicing partiality violated the royal law, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He continued by saying that if you break the law in one point then you break the whole law. For example, if you do not commit adultery but you do murder someone then you have broken the law. James concludes, "So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty."

Again, I come back to the question, what specifically did James mean when he used the term, "the law of liberty"? Observe first that James refers to the law of Moses or the Ten Commandments for the sake of illustration but the practice of showing partiality is totally inconsistent with "the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. Even more specifically, showing partiality is a violation of the royal law, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," a word that Jesus listed as the second of the great commandments, the first being that we are to love God

with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. There is then a significant linkage between Jesus and James' law of liberty. I propose that James specifically referred to the teachings of Christ as the perfect law of liberty.

Here is an observation. The Ten Commandments are accepted as obligatory. We are to worship God and not idols. To steal or murder or commit adultery is wrong. Do we accept the teaching of Jesus as just as authoritative? The Sunday School answer is, of course we do but, is turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, and following the Golden Rule, seen as obligatory in the practice of our daily lives? If the teaching of

Christ is practiced as if it is optional then are we truly following in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory? To what degree are we actually versed in the perfect law of liberty so that we can look in the mirror and know what must be changed so that we will be blessed in what we do?

We are at the same time familiar with the teachings of Jesus and strangers to it. We have a general familiarity with what He said but too often an inability to apply that teaching to the particular challenges of today. What would it mean today to turn the other cheek? Can you say that you are one "who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work," and one who will be blessed in what he does if you do not know what it would look like if you turned the other cheek as a matter of principle in your life today? How can we say that we follow this perfect law of liberty if we are not consciously obeying the teachings of Christ?

So we want to embark on a study of the teachings of Christ. Our purpose is to arrive at specific conclusions as to what His teachings mean for us today and to also develop a plan to concretely obey the commands of Christ and claim the blessings that attend such obedience.

The teachings of Christ include the words of Jesus that were spoken to specific situations. These words were often dramatic in presentation and dynamic in effect. Examples would include Jesus answer to the question of the rich young ruler or His comment about the widow's mite or His answer to the younger brother who claimed that his brother was being selfish in the distribution of their

father's estate or Jesus' answer to Peter when he wanted to know how often he should forgive his brother.

Another category of Jesus teaching is found in the sermons which He spoke. These include what we call the Sermon on the Mount, the Olivet Discourse, the Kingdom Parables and others. These address completely different material but we group them together since they were words that Jesus purposefully spoke to specific subjects.

Still a third category would be the answers Jesus gave to His enemies who asked and accused with a motive of doing harm to Jesus. Sometimes these are extended dialogues and they sometimes also include the use of parables in Jesus' answers. Jesus' defense of Himself and His ministry shape much of our understanding of what it meant for Jesus to be fully God and fully man and to have a mission here that was the cross and the empty tomb.

A fourth category would be the private sayings of Jesus spoken for the instruction and preparation of His disciples for the task of preaching the gospel and building the church after He departed. The upper room and garden sayings, the post resurrection sayings and the Caesarea Philippi retreat belong to this category. These are Jesus' most intimate words and they intend to draw us closer, inviting us into a life lived with and alongside of Jesus every step of the way.

We are interested then in all of Jesus' teaching. We want to compile our observations and conclusions into a perfect law of liberty, a basic guide to Jesus' teachings that can lead us to an obedient walk in the way of blessing.