

James 1:17-27

Psalm 125

Mark 7:24-37

The law of liberty

James is a popular New Testament book among some Christians because it seems much more straightforward and practical than many of the others. On the one hand, for many the instruction of James when he says “care for widows and orphans in their distress” seems much simpler than the more obscure points of formal Christian theology. On the other hand, James himself warns: faith without works is dead; do as the law commands.

If only it were that simple. For the law has a double root – in God and in society. This causes, at least in *our* society, a significant problem for those whose Christian faith is all action and no words. Society knows that it does not need God in order to have laws – and usually very good laws at that. And so many rightly wonder – why bother with God here? What does God offer us that we could not discover for ourselves? Faith seems to many not only a refuge from the demand to do good which James attacks. Faith becomes quite simply superfluous when it comes to doing the good. The pathos of the modern church – conservative and liberal – is that it so often points to its good works as evidence of the importance of God, which is really no evidence at all for a world quite capable of good works without invoking God. A god who does for us what we could actually do for ourselves is not a god at all, but simply our aspiration: what we want to be when we grow up.

To the extent that James is concerned with doing the good, then, one of the questions he raises for us in our particular day is just this: Is it possible to do good works without God in the picture? Both the world and the uncertain church want to answer “Yes”. But James, at least, despite all of his direct and practical instructions, declares that it is not: Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights (1.17). So James calls his people to good works, and yet locates the source of the good works we do in God himself. If one cares for “widows and orphans”, if one seeks to rid oneself of “sordidness and wickedness”, if we work to control our tongue and our anger, if we run homework clubs and food programs, these efforts, as “generous acts of giving” or “perfect gifts” to those around us, are said to have “come down from the Father of lights”.

James, then, offers us the two things we need to hear if our actions are to be good, if they are truly to be “Christian” and not simply moral works which echo or even challenge the expectations of the society we happen to be living in. On the one hand, there is the direct command: do this. If you have plenty and another does not have enough, give. If you are strong and another is weak, serve. The commandments are plain and straightforward.

On the other hand, we hear the gospel: generosity and perfect giving come not from us but from God. But why is *this* the gospel? While our giving may be generous – at least in our own estimation – and our works a great aid to those around us, they will always be liable to criticism and questioning. The problem of general moral rules is that they

are continually debated – this is the stuff of most of our newspaper reports and radio talk-back. Either the command to do the good creates an anxiety for righteousness in myself, such that I need always to be wondering whether I *have* done the right thing, or my reading of the right is contradicted by someone else's. As I act or speak I am under the constant demand that I be able to justify *myself* – to link my actions to some demand in such a way that I can say not only that I was free to do as I did, but that I *had* to act in that way: this is what the situation and the command demanded.

And so I am either, on the one hand, reduced to a not-quite-sure “I did the best I could” in defence against my critics or, on the other hand, I declare that I *had* to act this way and I can prove it before you and before God. In the first case I am not free; in the second, God is not – and neither of these are satisfactory.

In the end the law of love and service makes its demands of us, but it cannot be relied upon to deliver justice. Justice, or rightness, is too slippery a fish for us to net. We fool ourselves if we think we ever really get it right. This is not permission not to *try* to get it right. If people are hungry, feed them. We must try to get it right, but our trying is no reason to speak too highly of what we achieve. Justice, or rightness – which is a profoundly *relational* reality – is declared and made effective by God and not by our own actions. God says: I will work with your best efforts, and even your much-less-than-best ones. What else is the meaning of salvation through one we crucified?

Strikingly, then, *this* God is placed between us and those to whom we relate: we are mediated to each other by God. God, so to speak, *translates* our words and actions to each other. What is different here from the normal understanding of moral work is that God is not invoked as a *motivation* for good works but as a *reconciler* of me to the person in need toward whom my good works were not good enough.

We are called to see and experience the other person not as she might appear in herself and her actions but “in Christ” – made whole not by her own goodness but because God declares her whole. Just as importantly, we are to understand ourselves as truly being good when we are seen in the same way.

Much more might be said about our need actually to move from places of comfort to assist those who are in need; the command to love each other stands, and is not well observed. We cannot let ourselves off the hook here. But the problem is, particularly in denominations like ours in times like these, that we tend to begin with the good works because we have lost confidence in faith. We either assume that the gospel has been heard and that we need now to act or that, in the end, there is nothing but action. And so, I suspect, we usually hear only the law – God’s divine imperative – calling us to good works. The world knows better than the church that this is not a lot of fun, and scarcely liberating. This is because we either know what to do and find it difficult or we are so unsure what to do that we are left anxious.

But James speaks strangely of a *liberating* law – the “law of liberty” (1.25, 2.12). This is a law which not does simply demand of us but also makes possible that our actions are just – despite our imperfect response. The perfection of our work is in God’s participation, in his declaration that what we have done is good, in his making it good apart from what we have achieved by ourselves. God “steps in”, as it were, to join his perfect work to ours. All that is asked of us is to respond to the commands of the law. This happens not *from* faith as the first thing which occurs and then leads to action, but *in* faith: believing not “in God” but that God will make good of what I do. In this way we are both called to act in helping and serving, *and* helped and served ourselves by God in that moment.

The good news is not that God helps us to act or because we have acted, but that he would be with us in our actions, if we would be willing to let go of self-righteousness and allow God's righteousness be sufficient for us. The law of liberty is the freedom to do the very best we can, to allow that this "very best" will not be perfect and, in the grace of God, the freedom of being able to stand blameless before him, set free to do better next time.

By the grace of God, may *this* be the law ever increasingly found to be operating in the hearts, minds and actions of us all. Amen.
