

“The Law of Liberty”

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-12

As you were listening to the New Testament lesson, I couldn't help wondering if this isn't a tough scripture to hear. It struck me as such. It's full of words like law, transgressors, and judgment; dishonor, oppress, and convict. And most of these words are directed at the Christian community; at us. But there's a key to understanding this text that unlocks a hidden blessing – a hidden blessing that is there for you to see and to claim for yourself.

So I'll say it plainly. The take-home message from today's New Testament lesson is when James entreats us to speak and to act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. Living according to the law of liberty is the key to finding God's grace and mercy in all aspects of our lives. When we understand this, we are freed up in who we are as Christians. But when we lose touch with the spirit of this law, that's when we find ourselves struggling to live as God intended.

I'm very conscious about time when driving during the workweek. I've usually got a preconceived idea of exactly what time I need to be somewhere. So on those occasions when I'm running a few minutes late, I find the bane of my existence is the traffic light. Well, not all the lights; just the yellow ones. I've got it in my mind that if I would have just made that light, I'd be on time. I even harbor a little resentment against the car that gets through ahead of me, as I watch the taillights get smaller and smaller.

But the other day, I had a revelation that freed me up immensely when it comes to all this anxiety I've put myself under. One day after getting stopped by a yellow light, I must have noticed not only the taillights trailing off in distance, but the car, as well. And wouldn't you know it, when I got to the next light, there was that same car. Well, that was enough to cause a different light to go on. I realized that built into the traffic system of Greenville County is a little bit of grace; that I can get stopped at a yellow light and not suffer the consequences of arriving even one minute later.

I no longer stress about getting stopped by a yellow light. And in that way, a traffic law that was once a restriction has now become what James calls the law of liberty. I'm freed to stop at yellow lights, because I know there's enough grace built into the system that I won't be penalized by arriving a few minutes later.

Everyone seems to struggle with the notion that being restricted is bad, and having full reign in life would be better. Part of our struggle is finding the key that opens us to the blessings of God's grace and mercy in our day-to-day lives, even when the Christian life feels somewhat restricting, like a yellow traffic light. Now when I see my car keys hanging on the ring, I also see in my mind's eye the key to law of liberty – that God's grace and mercy has the power to permeate all creation, and that includes the laws and institutions we create. In this way, the law of liberty frees us to act like Christians, even when that's not such an easy thing to do.

In teaching us about this law, James focuses on three things: First, how our actions reflect our beliefs; second, why we sometimes act contrary to our beliefs; and third, how such actions affect us, as Christians. James teaches that our actions

reflect our beliefs. How we act reveals something about what we believe. James asks, “Do you, (my brothers and sisters), with your acts of favoritism, really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” Of course, it’s a rhetorical question. What’s really being said is, someone who buys into a corrupt system such of favoritism – quid pro quo, tit for tat – is choosing to align with the ways of the world; in this case, acting favorably toward those with nice clothes and fine jewelry because of what they can do for us, while overlooking people who are poor and disheveled. This type of favoritism is contrary to how God would have us act.

Yuri and I recently saw the musical Chicago at the Peace Center. If you’ve seen the musical, or the movie version starring Renee Zellweger, Catherine Zeta Jones, and Richard Gere, you no doubt remember Queen Latifah’s character: Matron "Mama" Morton. Mama Morton is a jailhouse guard in 1920s Chicago who’s not shy about the system she chooses to live under – quid pro quo. In her big musical number, she says she’s “got a little motto, always sees (her) through: When you're good to Mama, Mama's good to you!”

Mama Morton chooses to live under a system of corruption – what James calls the “law of transgressors.” Mama has no interest in trusting her life to God’s care and protection. She’s doing just fine taking bribes from the women she has under lock and key. The whole storyline of the musical is a tribute to such backroom deals. The two main characters, Roxie and Velma, owe their very lives to their ability to bribe their way into the backroom deals that get them exonerated of the murders they really did commit. And in the end, their moral compass is either so corrupted that they can no longer tell truth from fiction, or they just don’t care. The whole finale is a song and dance of them thanking us, the audience, for our faith and belief in their innocence. “God bless you,” they say. “Thank you and God bless you. God bless you; I love my life.” Well, that just about says it all. “I love my life,” more than anything or anyone else, and certainly more than their sense of right or wrong, good or bad, or their faith in God.

It’s not just bribes, backroom deals, or even yellow traffic lights that trip us up in life. It’s a hundred little things each day: showing more love and attention to one child over the other because of good grades by the one and/or the bad behavior of the other; passing by someone who is homeless or has a disability without a word, while greeting everyone else with a hardy, “How you doing?,” or finding ways to turn the system to our advantage even if we could – and should – pay a little more.

When we let ourselves get drawn into disciplinary systems that withhold love, social systems that devalue other human beings, or legal systems that allow us to get more than we deserve, we’re setting ourselves up to be at the mercy of something quite other than God. James places the system of favoritism – and thus all corrupt systems – on one side of the scale, and God on the other. But because God by definition cannot be corrupt, anyone who chooses to engage in a corrupt system has, in effect, chosen to disengage with God. That’s the first thing James teaches about how we act – that it says something about our relationship with God.

Next, James teaches about why we act the way we do, which we'll see is related to what we believe about Jesus. In James, Jesus is called "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ." The word "glorious" refers to the presence of God. Throughout scripture, God appears in glory. After the Israelites complain about being in the wilderness, God appears to them as, quote, the "glory of the Lord ... in the cloud." And in 1 Samuel, when the ark of God is captured and taken away by the Philistines, it is said that "the glory has departed from Israel." God's presence is reflected by God's glory. "Our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" is shorthand for God with us, God present in our midst. So to question someone's belief in "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ," as James does for those who buy into corrupt systems like favoritism, is to question whether we really believe in a God who is present, with us.

Knowing that God is present with us affects why we act the way we do. If we can key into our faith in God with us, we'll be less apt to buy into systems that favor our interests over and against someone else. And yet, we're only human. We will fall short of acting like Christians in all that we say and do. Which brings us to the third thing James teaches us, namely, how our actions affect us. As Christians whose faith is in a God with us, we hold the key to God's grace and mercy, which is poured out to us through the law of liberty. Our actions either tap into this law or they shut us off from it, and instead subject us the law of transgressors.

When our actions are based on some unjust system such as favoritism, we open ourselves up to the fear and deprivation of Mama Morton's system. We're taken care of only as long as we take care of Mama – or whoever else it is we've placed our faith in at the moment. James calls this system the "law of transgressors." The law of transgressors is not from God; it's of our own making. Think about it. If we live our lives based on quid pro quo or tit for tat – in which you'll do something from me, but only if I do something for you – than we are always at risk of being a transgressor under this type of a system – someone left out because we won't, or can't, play by the rules, or counted in solely because of what we've done for someone else. Fail to perform, and you're out. With the law of transgressors, the system offers no grace. No favors that aren't repaid, and no promises that aren't prepaid.

A friend of mine (nobody from Westminster) recently hired a contractor to remodel his house. And when he was presented with the bill, it was full of extras and unforeseen expenses. Well, my friend had negotiated a firm price up-front – no additions and no extras. And part of him felt that if the contractor did not include a significant aspect of the project upfront, or renegotiate during the project, than he ought to honor the price agreed upon. The contractor didn't see it that way. He wanted the full amount as submitted, and even suggested they go line-by-line to arrive at the total amount asked for. Said he was a stickler for accuracy and following the letter of the law.

Well with that, my friend gently reminded the contractor they had a legal agreement based on the lower amount, and that going line-by-line would only show how much more of the cost the contractor had to absorb as overage. And at

that moment, my friend ran the risk of becoming a transgressor of the law, of dealing with a fellow human being solely on the basis of a hard-line business practice that creates one winner and one loser.

But remembering his Christian faith, he caught himself; realized that they could compromise and honor a higher law under which neither party would lose. My friend realized that refusing to pay any extra would cost him a bit of his Christian identity. So he struck a compromise with the contractor so both parties gained. My friend paid a little extra, and in doing so affirmed his Christian faith. And the contractor accepted a little less money than he wanted, but got a little more grace than he deserved under his “letter of the law.” You see, instead of operating solely within the law – the law that creates transgressors on one side or the other, and often it’s both sides that suffer – instead of buying into this law, my friend was able to tap into a higher law, the law of liberty. He showed a little grace and mercy.

James teaches that “you do well if you really fulfill the royal law” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” But as my friend found, this often isn’t the first thing we think to do. Generally speaking, and to some extent, most people look out for their own interests; we feel we have to. So the problem for James is how are people encouraged to do the Christian thing and put their neighbor’s needs ahead of their own? To provide this encouragement – this instruction – James turns to the Gospel, and points us to one of the greatest keys of the Christian faith, the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven;” or as today’s lesson says, “God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith.” “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth;” or as it’s reflected in today’s reading, “... to be rich in faith, *and* to be heirs of the kingdom that (God) has promised to those who love him.” “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy;” “mercy triumphs over judgment.” That last part, also, is from today’s lesson.

To unlock the secrets of the Law of Liberty, James points us to these uniquely Christian truths, admonishing us not to judge one another, and assuring us that even when we do, there’s a judgment greater than ours, a judgment based on a grace and mercy that is active in all aspects of life. And yet, this type of an all-encompassing grace and mercy can be hard for us to accept, much less give. Sometimes we’re stuck at the yellow traffic light looking for an assurance that God’s grace and mercy is present even there.

Philip Yancey, in his book titled “What’s So Amazing about Grace?,” admits that “the notion of God’s love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity.” He points out that most religions don’t operate that way. “The Buddhists eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of Karma, the Jewish covenant, and Muslim code of law — each of these offers a way to earn approval,” notes Yancey. “Only Christianity dares to make God’s love unconditional.”

God proves his love for us, in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Under such grace and mercy, we need not judge ourselves or others, but rather give of ourselves for others, treating our neighbor as we would be treated.

Present to God's grace and mercy in all aspects of our lives, we need never worry about quid pro quo, tit for tat, what's in it for us. We just need to trust in God. James entreats us to "speak and to act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty." The law of liberty is the mercy that triumphs over judgment. It's the key to living life as God intended, showing grace and mercy to others, with each choice we make, each action we take, each word we speak.

The law of liberty frees us from heaping judgment upon ourselves and others by assuring us of a greater judgment in our lives, the judgment of God with us, Jesus Christ, who reaches out to us with grace and mercy, freeing us in spirit – and in fact – to reach out to others in Christ-like manner.

Dave Carlson
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 06, 2009