

“The Perfect Law That Gives Freedom”

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

November 4, 2018

Scripture: James 1:19-26

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

“The perfect law, the law of liberty or freedom.”

“The word that has the power to save your souls.”

I’m intrigued by these two short phrases in the first chapter of James.

What I wouldn’t give for a law that could set me free and a word that could save me! Isn’t that what we all aspire to? Freedom. Salvation. “Freedom” – a word used often around Remembrance Day – we may question that we truly have freedoms at times, but we do have freedom, don’t we, even the freedom for our citizens to do and say really ignorant things!

Wouldn’t we all like to be free of many things in life: to be free from unhelpful worries. I’d like the world to be free from fear mongering, from racism, prejudice, hatred, and the reality in our world of a widening economic gap between haves and have-nots. I’d like us all to be saved from those things. We could easily come up with lists of things that we wish to be freed from, and saved from, both personally and collectively.

It’s that list that James’ epistle is speaking directly about. Bible scholar Luke Timothy Johnson says that we need to think of the letter of James as though it is speaking directly to us. To think of it as **our** mail - for tech people - email directly to us, not spam.

So when James says “the perfect law, the law of liberty”, OR in some translations the word “freedom” is used, the word that has the power to save your souls. **The writer of James means me:** Dave LeGrand, you... Anne Pile, you ... Kathy Brankley, you...Nathan Nykor, you ... Directly to each and every single one of us who listens.

Imagine yourself leafing through the book of James in your Bible; like opening your mail. One of the things you’ll notice right away is that James is a short letter – it is just five chapters long. **Chapter one**, the one we read from today, sets the tone for the entire letter. **It’s like a table of contents.** The rest of the chapters lift up those themes summarized in Chapter 1. The themes are practical things how to: be patient in suffering, control your tongue, how to avoid showing favoritism, how to practice your values. Unlike the Gospels and other Epistles, James only refers twice to Jesus, but he does talk about the law. The “perfect” law, the law “of freedom.” What is this law? **It’s the law of love.**

The law of love, according to James, leads to freedom. It is the word that is salvation. And while James has little to say about Jesus, he has a lot to say about God, the giver of the law. Scholar Timothy Johnson says that James includes more statements about the nature and work of God than any other writing of the New Testament. James calls God: creator, lawgiver, saviour, judge, the father of all, the giver of all gifts, the one who gives generously.

The book of James is primarily about right living - about ethics - and these statements about God are the foundation of his belief about how we ought to live. So this is

essentially what our mail from James says: as Christians, we don't just act morally, we don't just give because it's a good thing to do, but we act morally and give so that we can live into our divine nature. So that we can be more God-like. So that we can live the law of love which leads to freedom and salvation.

Living the law of love. That's our mission on the journey of life, on the roads we travel, the roads that run through our homes, our workplaces, our hangouts, the roads that run through the heart of our relationships. We live the law of love individually by volunteering at church and elsewhere, by being a positive example in our family and in our community, by being a compassionate presence in our work place. We do that as a congregation, like the lovingly way you knitted red scarves to dedicate today, scarves that will embrace our friends on the streets of Sudbury.

We do that together as a United Church of Canada when you donate through our donations to Mission & Service. Mission & Service dollars get used near and far to make a difference collectively as a United Church of Canada in Canada and in communities and around the world. When we as a national church join our financial resources as one, we live out the law of love more powerfully than we ever could alone. For us as Christians, giving isn't just about breaking open the chequebook; it's about being broken open ourselves by the grace of God through our gifts so that we can more fully realize our divinity.

We don't just live the law of love, we **become** love. In the first sermon in this stewardship series, we talked about letting thankfulness overflow out of us; so much gratitude that we cannot help but love others. Last week, we talked about the "sheep" or "goat" choices we are presented with on the road of life; we can make a choice, individually, and as a congregation. Now, we are talking about the freedom and salvation that is the result of making loving choices.

What James really does in his letter to us is offer us a mirror. He says: "Don't just listen to the word, but do what it says." Because if you don't, you're like "those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing."

James also loves ancient prophets, and quotes them later. We hear echoes of Isaiah and Amos, prophets calling their ancient listeners, and you today, to holy living and holy giving.

We are called to live according to an ancient vision passed down to us by our ancestors of faith. When we live according to this law of love, of freedom, of salvation, we are part of that greater vision of God. Thanks be to God for the blessing of this mail, or email in our inbox directly to us, not spam, that each one of you, and I, received today from brother James. May we be fully captivated by the vision, heart and soul. Amen!

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