

The Perfect Law of Liberty

The Fifth Sunday After Easter (Rogation Sunday)

(From the Epistle: *St. James i. 22 ff.*)

(King James Version-KJV) *22 But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. 23 For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: 24 For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. 25 But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. 26 If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. 27 Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.*

(New International Version-NIV) *22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 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 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 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. 26 If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*

Yesterday I was going through old photos trying to pick one out to send to a friend. I lit upon one of Linda and me a few years ago, standing before the famous Liberty Bell, now safely housed in its old building in Philadelphia. The inscription on the bell, as you may remember, is *Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof Lev. XXV X*. The entire verse from Scripture reads:

Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan.

“Liberty” here meant “free” from the ownership of others to whom land had been sold out of misfortune or necessity. The land was to revert, be set free, to its original owners, allowing them a chance to start over again.

To our nation’s fathers, the concept of liberty meant other things, however. In declaring independence from Britain, they affirmed in those words that are like music to American hearts:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Liberty meant freedom from arbitrary and unfair rule, to pursue reasonable ends that ensure one’s own well-being and also support that of others. Those who etched it upon the bell would have taken for granted that the right to liberty would be invalidated if those invoking it were to use it for ignoble purposes. For too many today, liberty to live has indeed come to mean “license

to sin”. It is a cracked bell indeed that is being sounded today on behalf of such supposed rights. They should be given the names they deserve.

In today’s Epistle, we also encounter liberty:

But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty [NIV: perfect law that gives freedom...], and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

The Apostle James is speaking of *the word*: the Scriptures, but especially the proclamation of the Gospel. The NIV commentary notes that the *perfect law* is: “...[T]he moral and ethical teaching of Christianity, which is based on the Old Testament law, as embodied in the Ten Commandments, but brought to completion (perfection) by Jesus Christ.”

The idea of a *law of liberty* seems a mutual contradiction. Laws, we feel, constrict and constrain us. Laws warn us, like traffic lights, or stop signs, or flashing blue lights. But we are created to live in intimate connection with God, not in wild, unhindered rulership of our own lives. When we gladly and willfully accept the yoke of God’s Law, it leads not to bondage, but to liberty, in the most profound sense.

With this preparation, I want to focus upon a very specific abuse of this divine law. It is particularly serious because it is accomplished when men use God’s laws to control others, and to wield power over them. If left unchecked, it brings men into spiritual bondage, which is far more serious than bars or shackles, because it leads to the destruction of souls. It is the bitter consequence of false teaching and misrepresentation of Scripture. It is so subtle, and powerful, that its effects often go unnoticed until the bondage is complete. Once one is inside the prison house, as it were, of such confinement, all the real world “out there” when viewed from within becomes distorted by the lens imposed by the bondage, so that the objectivity and clear thinking necessary to extricate oneself from such a predicament are lost. One is reminded of Jesus’ own fateful words:

Luke 11:34 The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore, when your eye is good, your whole body also is full of light. But when your eye is bad, your body also is full of darkness. 35 Therefore take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness. 36 If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, the whole body will be full of light, as when the bright shining of a lamp gives you light.

It is upon such foundations that the cults thrive. They have ensnared countless millions. We shouldn’t be deceived about their power and attraction. Inside the jail there are so many nice things dangling that we lose sight of the warden, the gates, the locks, and the guards. There may even be a real sense of liberty and freedom within the structure, as long as one keeps away from the walls, where the real coldness and deadness of the prison can be sensed; or from the electric fences and manned sentinel towers which discourage us from questioning the status quo or even doubting it in our own minds. Furthermore, the prisons seem to look much nicer than the real thing. The leaders are confident, well-organized, and unified. Much less mess and debris do we

find there than within the confused and divided halls of real Christendom where the Church trudges along often amid such hardship and opposition.

If other cultures, such as Europe, seem to have birthed religious deadness and indifference, America, where our vaunted liberties have permitted us to soar unrestrictedly in every direction, has given rise to cults innumerable. The glittering carnival of American religious offerings is so bewildering and confusing that many have simply turned away from every and all forms of religion.

Often those who are in spiritual bondage, but really love it --and it may seem very strange to say that anyone should be like that-- deeply resent and even hate those who keep themselves deliberately free of it. Remember the example of Jesus' life. The pharisaical Jews, who both promoted the religious law and made a merry profit keeping others in bondage to it, were His principal enemies:

***John 8:31** Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; **32** And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free . **33** They answered him, We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou , Ye shall be made free? **34** Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you , Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. **35** And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. **36** If the Son therefore shall make you free , ye shall be free indeed.*

They did not perceive themselves to be imprisoned, nor would they admit for a moment that they themselves were the agency of others' imprisonment.

The penalty for such behavior is great. Jesus aims His strictest and sternest condemnations against the proponents of such sins (from Matt. 23, excerpts):

***13** But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in ...**15** Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made , ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves...**32** Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. **33** Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?*

These surely are among the severest words ever spoken. God has reserved the very worst for those who spiritually enslave the souls of others, and by trickery, deceit, and force maintain them in that state. None of us know anything about what *woe* is, let alone *the damnation of hell*.

It is well to point out again just how hard it is to extricate oneself from such a situation. It only follows that if much was required to bring a soul forward into such a state, much will be required to bring it out. Such journeys are often accomplished entirely alone, without friends, congenial company, and sometimes even family, to assist or sympathize. If one has allowed one's entire context to be lived within the encircling walls of some deception, one must sacrifice everything to take exception with it. Many, if not most, are ever willing to undergo such a journey of difficulty and stress, even though the promised goal is true freedom. The injuries of those who have made it out are often significant and long lasting.

What is the end of it all? Jesus counsels in many places, and in many forms, to watch our step!:

Matt. 7:13 Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat : 14 Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

This is no easy stroll. The narrow way is hard, full of challenges and opposition, unpopular, and rigorous beyond words. If you don't watch your step, you will trip over hundreds of roots, exposed rocks, and tree-falls, and your fall may really hurt. Others have gone before, but they are looking back, urging us on. There is company along the way, but all are up against the same circumstances.

Let's return again to the text under consideration here: *But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein...* Good churches, right churches, faithful, orthodox churches, are in the business of supplying their people with every grace necessary to keep themselves on the right path. This, combined with your own personal Bible study, --along with constant commitment to put what you've learned into practice, as today's Epistle also loudly proclaims-- is the insurance you need against losing your spiritual liberty.

When liberty is lost, more happens than merely losing something. There are many things which, if we lost them, we might find a way to do without. But liberty, once lost, is very hard to recover. It is relatively easy to surrender it, but much harder to recover it. Spiritual liberty, especially, is a thing subtle and delicate. Its enemies are many, visible and invisible. We must, --we simply must-- be among those who are its guardians and protectors.

God help us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.