

*Words and Deeds: The Law of Freedom*  
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*John 8:31-36; Galatians 5:13-25; Acts 15:22-35*

Our final Scripture reading today is Acts 15:22-35. Listen now to the holy and sacred word of God. “Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. With them they sent the following letter: “The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul -- men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.” The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.”

What does freedom mean to you? That question sounds like an idea for a middle school essay contest. As Americans, freedom is something we have as part of our DNA. One of the blessings of our country is that we are able to live as we desire – to worship as we want to worship, to meet as we want, to say what we want to say, to write what we want to write, even to petition the government when we’ve been wronged. All of those rights are enshrined in the first amendment to the Constitution alone.

But freedom always has limits established in law. We can worship as we want to worship – but we can’t worship in ways that are dangerous to others or that disturb their rights. Our speech is limited in the same way – I can’t yell “fire” in a crowded building or defame someone in public without potential consequences. We can gather as we want, but not if it stops a lawful business from operating. As an old saying goes, “Your liberty to swing your first ends at my nose.” Ethical freedom always has limits.

That’s what we’re going to explore in today’s passage. If the law of the Old Testament was perfect and holy, why don’t we follow it today? If the New Testament changes everything and gives us freedom from the Old Testament law, why are there still rules of conduct for Christians? How are we to live as God’s people in modern society? We’re going to try and answer those questions in real and practical ways.

Let's take a moment to remember last week's lesson, as it's directly connected to this passage. All the Gentiles coming into the Kingdom of God through faith in Jesus made a huge stir in the Jewish community of believers. A group called the Judaizers started preaching that unless the Gentiles became Jews – unless they went through the rituals of becoming Jewish and kept Jewish law – they couldn't be saved. It became such a big problem that they held a council in Jerusalem for elders and disciples from the entire church to discuss it.

At the council, they listened to all the testimony of how God had welcomed the Gentiles into the Kingdom and proved it through signs and wonders. Peter testified to how no one was able to fully keep the Law of Moses, not them and not their ancestors. Finally James summed up everything and encouraged them to write a letter to the churches with their answer to the question of the Law for the Gentiles. And that's what we heard today.

The letter is really very basic. They sum up the situation – unauthorized preachers came up and disturbed your peace, troubled your minds with this idea that you weren't saved by Jesus after all. We're sending some men along with our dear friends Paul and Barnabas (whom you already know) to confirm what they said was true – that you don't have to become Jewish to be saved in Jesus. The Holy Spirit led us to only a few requirements. Don't eat food sacrificed to idols, or blood, or meat of strangled animals. Stay away from sexual immorality. That's it.

Judas, Silas, Paul, and Barnabas take the message back up to Antioch in the north, and representatives from all the northern churches come to hear it. They are really glad, Judas and Silas encourage them and stay for a while. Eventually they are sent home with blessings for the southern churches closer to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas stay in Antioch, which they'd set up as a home base, and from there they preach and teach and others start doing the same. Simple, right? The passage gives us the straightforward facts.

But not so fast. We learned last week that this dispute means we are under grace, not under law. We have been shown grace after grace by Jesus, and show we show as much grace as possible to those around us – especially the hard to love and the hard to forgive. Jesus summed up the whole of the law as “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Is the church creating a new law when it sends these commands to the Gentile believers?

Not really. Instead, the church emphasized the moral parts of the law that had been lost in the Gentile culture of the day. Why doesn't the letter from the apostles and elders mention more grave sins like murder? It didn't have to. The moral law from the Law of Moses was preached in every synagogue in every city, James said last week. This was nothing new.

And moreover, as Paul would write about the Gentiles in Romans 2:15, “the requirements of the law are written on their hearts.” Take a look at ancient law codes and you'll see many differences, but there are similarities with Jewish law. Laws against murder, violent crime, and theft are common. Pagan civilizations had many terrible practices, but most recognized crimes that needed to be punished to avoid anarchy. The Jewish law established a people for God, helped them be in a right relationship with Him, and pointed to the need for a Savior – but not every rule was a moral principle for all time. That's why we don't follow it today.

James' letter doesn't emphasize new laws but ethical issues that would trip up the consciences of the Gentile believers. Most of them have to deal with idolatry. When we hear, "don't eat food sacrificed to idols or blood or meat from strangled animals," we're like, "what?" Those restrictions set on the early church weren't universal rules either. They pointed to the universal rule, which was "don't commit idolatry – serve God alone."

For most people, Jew and Gentile alike, eating meat was a religious practice. Because animals had a lot of purposes other than meat vital to life in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, they didn't eat anywhere near the amount of meat we do. And when they did, it was important to them that it serve the purpose of worship – if your god required a sacrifice of an animal, you weren't going to lose that opportunity. The vast majority of animal meat sold in the marketplace had been sacrificed to a pagan god. For some Jews, it was unthinkable to ever eat that meat. It went against their conscience. For most Gentiles, it was Tuesday – never gave it a second thought.

James was warning them that it would be easy for them to commit idolatry and fall back into their old pagan ways if they were to go into the marketplace and do what they'd done in the past. They had just come out of a world where they believed the gods could be manipulated by their offerings. They might sacrifice to one idol when they needed a good harvest, another when war was on the horizon, another to ward off disease. They had abandoned those beliefs – but it would be easy to get back into old habits and patterns. It might also create a crisis of conscience amongst those who thought what they were doing was evil but felt like they had to participate.

Later, Paul would write in 1 Corinthians 8 that there was nothing inherently wrong with eating that meat. It wasn't a universal law and had nothing to do with offending God. But if your conscience offended you, if your conscience said it was wrong, then to do it would be a sin, a deliberate act against God – not because it was declared evil, but because you thought so and did it anyway. Paul said that he was perfectly fine to eat meat that was sacrificed to pagan gods since they were nothing – but he also said he'd never eat meat again if it caused a fellow Christian to violate their conscience and sin.

The question for us is not whether or not Meijer sells sacrificed meat. Because we are not under the law, we don't have to worry if what we eat is kosher. But where does our freedom end when it comes to the same principle? Our freedom ends when we violate our consciences and participate in something that takes the place of God. It's no sin to watch a television show or play a game or watch a movie, but if that's what becomes my driving factor in life, I need to quit. If I care more about the sports score than my God, I need to reevaluate my priorities. If anything in my life is getting in the way of spending time with God or causing me to devalue Him, it's got to go.

Those aren't universal rules. When the church decided to make universal rules, they said things like no card playing, no dancing, no drinking, no movies, no nothing on Sundays except church twice and naps and reading your Bible. And do you know what that did for stopping sin? Virtually nothing. Because if your temptation doesn't lie in those areas, you can feel good about yourself not doing those and wind up gossiping about your friends and slandering your neighbor and winding up far more hellish than someone who enjoys those things without breaking their conscience and doing anything against God.

When the letter to the Gentile church mentions sexual immorality, it's doing the reverse. It gives the universal rule alone. And why? Because the pagan world was loaded with sexual immorality. It would have been impossible to mention every way the pagans broke God's plan for sexuality to be something wonderful shared only in a marriage covenant for life between a man and a woman. It would have been improper to list what the pagans were doing.

For us, the issues surrounding this are very different from those in ancient Rome, but just as important. To try to look relevant to the world, we have backed off God's plan for us for marriage and family. It's a plan God gave us not to make things harder on us but to help us flourish, to help us prosper. In the modern world, almost everyone has made some really big errors on this one. We don't condemn anyone for mistakes they've made in the past. We've all made some huge ones. But our freedom ends where someone else's freedom starts. And because of the way God made us, there is never a point at which it's just personal. It always affects others, even what we think in our minds.

Our failures in this area to stand up for God's truth have led to a society where it is seen as strange to not live together before marriage, where waiting for marriage is mocked, and where divorce is just a life option. It has led to a society where children, intended to be a gift within marriage, are now in New York and Washington DC and many other places considered disposable until they leave the mother's womb. Our failure to recognize the law of freedom has led to so, so many people being hurt in countless ways...emotionally, physically, mentally, spiritually. And it has led us to see sexuality as self-centered, rather than self-sacrificing and self-giving. These sins can be forgiven just like any others. But just like today, they were a real problem for the Gentiles whose entire society had failed to teach God-honoring sexual ethics.

Both of the issues addressed by the early church go back to the root of the law of freedom: love God fully, love your neighbor as yourself. If you practice idolatry of any sort, you aren't loving God fully – your love is divided. If you practice sexual immorality, you don't love your neighbor as yourself – you are thinking of yourself above another, you are using someone else rather than genuinely caring for them.

Are there still codes of conduct for Christians? Yes. In Galatians this morning, Paul listed behaviors that if left unrepentant would disqualify us from the Kingdom of God. We want to do everything we can to avoid evil behavior. But the law of freedom in Christ is different from the Old Testament law in a major way. The law of freedom looks at everything from the perspective of "love God and love your neighbor" and then asks, "How can I best do that?"

If I love God with my whole heart, I'm going to want to please Him. I'm going to pray for those who need His rescue and deliverance and who need Him to change their hearts. I'm going to stay away from things that lead me to stray from Him. I'm going to spend time with Him on a regular basis – not in a legalistic way where I'm going to worry about doing any work on a particular day of the week, but in a way where I've spent faithful time with Him and also time doing His work in the world. I'm going to give to the mission of His church as His Spirit leads me – not focused on hitting an exact 10% number, but giving in such a way that I know He is pleased and fits with the resources He has given me. I'll see the Old Testament law as showing me the heart of God, and I'll work to honor that heart.

If I love my neighbor as myself, I'm going to look after my neighbor's needs as much as my own. I'm not going to steal from him; I'm not going to covet what she has. I'm not going to look to harm him in any way. I'm not going to lie about her to make myself look better. In fact, I'm going to do a lot more than just not do stuff. I'm going to be interested in their well-being. I'm going to see to their needs. I'm going to care about their families. When it comes to politics, I am going to vote and make decisions that show I care about both what God desires and what is truly best for both my neighbor and me.

I'm going to love when the loving is hard. I'm going to love my Muslim neighbor and my atheist neighbor and my gay neighbor. I'll become their best customer; I'll play games with them at the game shop; I'll give them a good tip; I'll watch their pets when they're on vacation. In doing those things, I'm not accepting their beliefs or actions as right or good or moral; I'm just going to love them as myself. And by doing so, I will please God, and if the Holy Spirit draws them, through that love they will believe and enter the Kingdom of God themselves.

The Old Testament law gives me a framework for my morality; it helps shape my way of thinking. The 10 Commandments are a great place to start – it's interesting that of all the Old Testament law, they were the only part placed in the Ark of the Covenant. Other parts of the Law will help me think deeply about how we act towards God and one another. I will study the law as it guides me towards Godly thinking, and as it points me towards Jesus whose blood on the cross covers my inability to fulfill the law.

Must I follow it letter for letter, note for note, and forsake bacon forever? No. I'm not under that obligation. However, as a faithful believer, I will look to understand the purpose of those rules that aren't inherently moral. Many parts of the Law have a moral point to make even if they aren't moral in and of themselves. For example, did God hate for His people to eat shrimp and pork chops? No, but He does desire us to be set apart for Him, useful for Him, and that can mean giving up good things in order to serve Him.

Could you go serve God in India knowing that if you lived there permanently, you'd probably never eat a hamburger again? Nothing wrong with hamburger, but it's the price you pay to live in India. Could you help families in rural Appalachia knowing that to be accepted, you'd have to give up a lot of creature comforts to be like them? All of a sudden, we realize that the principle of the Old Testament law is far more important than the exact law itself. The exact law says, "Don't eat shellfish." The principle of the law is to put God above your own desires and interests even if you don't understand precisely why.

How are we to live as God's people in modern society? We live according to our rebuilt conscience that is guided by the Holy Spirit. We live fully informed through the study of the Scripture, instructed by the words of Jesus and His chosen prophets, priests, poets, and kings, living as holy people who not only live by the Word of God but reflect it in their daily lives. If we aren't sure we know enough to have a fully-formed and Godly conscience, we keep studying and learning and practicing. We desire the fruit of the Spirit in our lives and, as far as it depends on us, we show them as God gives us the ability. If we live with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, we will do well. We will know the freedom that Christ has given us, and we will live in grace as we know it has been shown to us.