

Exegetical Brief: James 1:25 - "The Perfect Law That Gives Freedom"

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The Question

James 1:25 refers to the blessing that comes to the man who obeys "the perfect law that gives freedom." Does this passage refer to the law, the gospel, or to both?

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.

Actually, the NIV is not strictly literal here since the Greek is εἰς νόμον τέλειον τὸν τῆς ἐλευθερίας, "into the perfect law, the one of freedom."

What is this "law" which is characterized in some way by freedom? Is it the law in the narrow sense, the commandments of God? Is it the gospel, the truth that sets us free? Is the term here used in the widest sense for the whole Word of God?

תּוֹרָה

It is well known that the Hebrew word תּוֹרָה can refer to law in the narrow sense, to the whole Word of God, or even to the gospel. Although it is clear that the basic meaning of תּוֹרָה is "instruction" or "teaching," it has traditionally been translated "law" in most English translations, including the NIV. This follows the practice of the Septuagint, which rendered תּוֹרָה with the Greek word νόμος. In the New Testament the term νόμος can, therefore, take on all the connotations of תּוֹרָה, even though these connotations are not natural to the Greek word.

In the Old Testament תּוֹרָה refers to instruction, human and divine.

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching (Proverbs 1:8).

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah! (Isaiah 1:10).

It refers to the general concept of law or to specific laws or commandments.

Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth (Joshua 1:7-8).

The same law applies to both the sin offering and the guilt offering (Leviticus 7:7).

Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform (Exodus 18:20).

It refers to the five books of Moses. This usage is reflected also in the New Testament.

Walk in his ways, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses (1 Kings 2:3).

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44).

Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote-Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45).

תּוֹרָה refers to God's Word in general. It may refer to any part of the Old Testament.

But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night (Psalm 1:2).

Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'" (John 10:34). [The reference is to Psalms.]

But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: "They hated me without reason" (John 15:25). [The reference is to Psalms.]

In the Law it is written: "Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me," says the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:21). [The reference is to Isaiah 28:11,12.]

In a small number of passages תּוֹרָה refers primarily or even entirely to the gospel.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:33,34).

See Isaiah 42:1-7 for another "law" passage that focuses on the gospel, especially Isaiah 42:4, "In his law the nations will put their hope."

In many passages, especially in the psalms, "law" presents the same problem that it presents in James 1:25. It is not immediately clear if the passage refers to the law, the gospel, or both.

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul (Psalm 19:7).

Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law (Psalm 119:18).

Their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but I delight in your law (Psalm 119:70).

Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble (Psalm 119:165).

"Law" in James

Since James is one of the most Hebraic writers of the New Testament, we would expect that his use of νόμος would approximate the range of תּוֹרָה. The Old Testament usage, therefore, gives us little help in narrowing the possible interpretations of James 1:25. It seems that all of the possibilities, law, gospel, or both, are open.

Commentators are divided on the issue. Most see James 1:25 as a reference to law. Some see it as a reference to gospel, but it is often difficult to determine in what sense the terms "law" and "gospel" are being used by Reformed commentators.

The Context

We will, therefore, have to resolve the question on the basis of the immediate and wider context. On this basis it seems clear that in our text James is referring to law in the narrow sense, God's commandments. The reasons for this are the following.

There appears to be no place in the New Testament where νόμος is used in the meaning gospel, though Romans 8:2 presents some of the same questions as James 1:25. Jeremiah 31:33 and 34 are quoted in Hebrews 10:15-17 as a reference to the new covenant of the gospel, but this is not an independent usage of the author of

Hebrews. Νόμος occurs only within the quotation. The author of Hebrews retains the plural "laws" as found in his Bible, the Septuagint, even though this does not precisely reflect the Hebrew.

It might still be argued, however, that it is not unreasonable to suggest that James could be the only New Testament writer to use the term "law" to mean "gospel" since he is the most Hebraic writer of the New Testament. Strongly against this argument is his use of the term law in James 2:8 and 12.

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment! (James 2: 8-13).

It seems clear that the reference here is to the moral law, not to the gospel. This suggests that James' usage in chapter one is parallel to that in chapter two. This is especially likely since it is James' style to circle back and resume topics he had begun previously. In James "the law of freedom" is the moral law.

The law of freedom

In what sense is the law of God a "law of freedom"? To be sure to the unbeliever and to the Old Man the law of God is a hateful restriction on their freedom. But to the New Man it is a guide to delightful freedom. Keeping God's law is the highest sort of freedom; sinning is the most abject slavery. In that sense the law is a law of freedom.

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:34-36).

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love (Galatians 5:1,13).

Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God (1 Peter 2:16).

Motivated by the gospel, the child of God keeps the law joyfully with a willing spirit. In that sense God's law is a law of freedom.

For in my inner being I delight in God's law (Romans 7:22).

Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me (Psalm 51:12).

James gives us an important reminder when he calls the moral law a "law of freedom." Keeping God's law is not a burden. It is true freedom. It is the path to happiness and blessing. When we look at God's law and see that it is a royal law, a perfect law that gives freedom, we will say with the psalmist, "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free" (Psalm 119:32).