

A Sermon for Religious Liberty Sabbath

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The Many Dimensions of Freedom: A Biblical Perspective

Human beings generally consider freedom from the perspective of the benefits that one can receive from it. We think about it in terms of fundamental human rights, such as the freedom of religion, or freedom of expression; a social and legal value to be defended and preserved.

However, when we consider it from a biblical perspective, we find that there is far more to the concept of freedom than first meets the eye.

First, God alone is free. Only God is independent, totally autonomous, not needing anything or anyone. However, the God who is totally autonomous decided to create human beings in His image in order to reciprocate His love; a love that cannot exist without freedom. The freedom to choose is essential for love to materialize. And so, God created freedom.

Jesus was very explicit that he had come to bring liberty to captives; that the core of the message he brought was freedom. If you look at his words in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-12), for instance, everything is connected to freedom. For example, in the first Beatitude Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." That is connected to freedom. Why? It is as if he is

saying, "Blessed are those who affirm their dependence on God." Those who are not addicted to materialism, not addicted to anything that will rob God of His sovereignty over human beings. This first aspect of freedom is connected to the fact that God is, indeed, our sufficiency.

And then, "Blessed are those who come to God for comfort." Those who are not addicted to substitutes or substances to fill the longing of their inner beings. They who do not by all means and at all costs shun the pain and suffering of the world. In fact, they wait on the Lord. Why? Because God is our comforter.

The next Beatitude talks about meekness. "Blessed are the meek." Those who are not addicted to violence. Those who do not violate others' integrity or dignity to gain advantage of any kind. Why? Because God, again, is our supreme good. So, freedom in this Beatitude is connected to ultimate dependence on God. Waiting on God in every aspect. Recognizing that God is our sufficiency.

The next Beatitude is, "Blessed are those who seek righteousness." That is, those not addicted to injustice. Why? Because they give to others their due. Because God is our righteousness. And righteousness, of course, is here an existential attitude of benevolence, of being the right person for others; of being a blessing to others.

Then we have another Beatitude connected to freedom again. "Blessed are the merciful." Those who are so free that they open their hearts and hands. Those who are not addicted to revenge or who hold grudges. Why? They take the example of Jesus himself. God is our righteous judge and intercessor and if God is the intercessor, who are we to try to confine people? Thus, we become intercessors for other people. Think about the freedom that Jesus displayed on the cross. He prayed even his enemies, those crucifying him, those inflicting excruciating pain on him. Why? Because he was free. He could pray, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." And it was the same for Stephen. As he was stoned, he prayed for others, reflecting a deeply free existential attitude.

The next Beatitude is very telling: "Blessed are the pure in heart." This means those who are not addicted to defilement or dirt. Their eyes are fixed on the Lord Jesus. Why? Because Jesus, again, is our holiness, our righteousness. And the following Beatitude is also

connected to freedom: "Blessed are the peacemakers." Blessed are the agents of reconciliation, for only when one is free can that person be involved in the work of reconciliation. These people are not addicted to division, to hostility, or war. In fact, they bring people together. Why? Because of the deep conviction that God is our peace. And if God is our peace, then we are free to become peacemakers.

And then, "Blessed are those persecuted," because they choose Jesus and his cross, his resurrection, his ascension, his intercession as high priest, and his coming as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Jesus, then, becomes the center of the life of the free person. In fact, these people are so free that they are not addicted to fame and they would rather be shamed than to defame the character of the Savior. They would rather lose their lives than betray the Lord of their lives. God is their supreme value, the desire of their hearts and minds. In essence, blessed are those whose sufficiency is God because they become free. Those whose supreme value is God himself, are free.

So, there is more to true freedom than meets the eye and the Beatitudes provide our first example. But there is another example.

You see, freedom is something that is so deep that it encapsulates the content of the whole message of the Christian faith. This is the reason why in the Book of Galatians, chapter five, the apostle Paul states very clearly that it is for *freedom* that Christ set you free.

Here I would like to pause and consider a parallel from the Old Testament – God's liberation of His people, Israel. And whenever God liberates, God gives gifts. It was at Pentecost – in the third month – when the people of Israel left Egypt and that they met God at Sinai. There, God gave Israel a gift; the gift of the law, the Ten Commandments. That was the old covenant. In the new covenant, the same thing happened. God liberates His people through the cross. It is a new Exodus. And now Christians are given a new gift. In the Old Testament, the gift was the law. In the New Testament, the gift is the Holy Spirit.

But why the Holy Spirit? Because the Holy Spirit brings liberty. We are told in 2 Corinthians 3 that where the Spirit is, there is liberty.

What is it that the Holy Spirit does? The Holy Spirit pours the love of God into our heart. There is a deep connection between freedom and love. This is absolutely extraordinary and it is the core of what God gives. The restoration of God's love in our heart is what brings true freedom.

As we celebrate freedom, it is extremely important that we remember that the ground, the foundation, the justification for freedom, is love itself. No wonder that the apostle Paul, expanding on the teaching of Jesus, said something absolutely extraordinary when he said he would show early Christians "the most excellent way." What is this most excellent way? In essence, it is love. But the way he puts it is remarkable.

He says, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1). And then he continues, "And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2) And then he said, "And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits me nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3). Paul told his readers and us, today, that should one master all means of communication, without love it is meaningless. Should one master all the content of communication about God, the future, mysteries, prophesy, all knowledge, even faith, to the point of moving mountains, without love, it is nothing. And then he continues, should one totally commit all one's possessions to others, without love, it is nothing. Should one even get to the point of giving his or her own body, without love, it comes to nothing, as well.

In other words, whatever we achieve or do, whatever freedom we may think we have, without love, it is nothing. This is what makes Christian freedom something deeper. Christian freedom is not just another human right; it is not just something that one benefits from. It is an internal disposition, a gift of grace, a gift from God who pours out love. And this love pushes even Christian to go to sacrifice even his or her own freedom for the sake of love and for the sake of others.

There is more to true freedom than meets the eye. And what is more? It is love.

The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 insists on the performance of love. In this chapter, he uses 15 verbs to describe the performance of love, and each of these is impossible without freedom.

"Love is patient," he says. Which means that without freedom, without this love and this patience, one cannot be free. Then, "Love is kind." Love shows kindness.

And then he continues. "Love does not envy." It is free from envy. "It does not brag." It is free from boasting about anything and free from arrogance. "Love does not act or behave dishonorably. It does not seek its own thing." It represents freedom from selfishness. "Love is not easily provoked." It is free from being susceptible or easily angered. "It does not count the bad." Freedom from remembering the wrong. Love "does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth." And then he says, love is so powerful – it actually makes a person so free – that the person "bears all things, believes all things, hope all things, and endures all things."

Consider the first two of these 15 verbs. First, "Love is patient." It accepts dependence and reliance on God. It contains echoes of the words of Jesus recorded in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit." Love does not attempt to take matters in its own hands. Why? Because love waits on God.

Yet the second verb shows that love is not passive. It works for the good of others. "Love is kind." It shows acts of kindness. It serves others. It is turned towards others and therefore there is no envy, no comparison, no competing. It puts others before self.

So, there are indeed deeper issues surrounding the idea of freedom than first meets the eye. The Bible opens our hearts to go deeper than to simply claim freedom as a human right. Rather, it prompts us to allow the Holy Spirit to pour out God's love into our hearts so that we may be truly free. And then we can understand that love will never fail, it will remain free. There are prophecies that will be set aside, tongues that will cease, knowledge that will fail, but love will stay. Paul explains this in terms of Christian maturity. "When I was a child, I

used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:11-13).

Paul invites us here to pursue love. Why? Because love is the way to freedom. The way of freedom. The expression of freedom. No wonder Jesus could say, "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

This freedom is what I deeply wish for each one of you, especially during this Liberty Sabbath. May you fully embrace not only God's law, but God's Holy Spirit, who will pour into our hearts God's love so that we may be truly free. And may we each experience grace from Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit until the day He comes and we can fellowship eternally with Him in love, free, even from death. Free from anything that will hinder our full access to God in fellowship throughout eternity.

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