

Freedom

Romans 6, Galatians 5, 1 Peter 2

Turn to Romans 6. The Canadian charter of rights and freedoms is an important and good charter. It is a kindness from God to live in a country that holds up those things. There has been controversy recently about whether or not some Canadian regulations violate the Canadian charter of rights and freedoms.

We're talking about freedom in the New Testament today, because that controversy has come into the church, and that's not good. So we see how the apostles taught us about freedom, to give us some perspective. Our starting point will be what God tells us about freedom.

Last week we talked about the new nationalism, about being God's race and God's nation, about being foreigners and strangers here, waiting for our new country. I did this so we would step back from Canada, and focus on our real citizenship and nationality, the one the Lord gave us.

I hope the freedom Scriptures we read today will do the same thing. When the apostles talk about freedom, they do not mean what passionate Canadians mean by rights and freedom.

But before we turn to Romans 6, here are a few stories from the New Testament to give us a feel for how rights and freedoms worked in those days. In Matthew 2, we read how King Herod ordered all the baby boys in Bethlehem 2 years old and younger to be slaughtered. He wanted to destroy the one born to be king of the Jews.

No one knows how many baby boys died by a soldier's sword. One scholar guessed 30, which is reasonable. After Herod did this, there was no inquiry, no report. He had been appointed by Rome, but Rome did not slap his hands. He was upset, he wanted to protect his throne, so that's what he did. It was awful, everyone knew that, and carried on.

In Luke 13 we read that some people told Jesus about those Galileans whose blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices. Galilee was not in Pilate's jurisdiction. But some Galileans offended Pilate, and when Galileans came to the Jerusalem temple as pilgrims, probably to celebrate Passover, he had some Galileans slaughtered. Not necessarily the ones who angered him. That's all we know. There were no consequences for Pilate, he carried on as always.

In Acts 18, we read that Paul met Priscilla and Aquilla in Corinth. They were from Rome, and had been expelled by the edict of Claudius, in the year 49. Jews in Rome were causing disturbances having to do with Christ. When we read in Acts about the passionate reaction of some Jewish synagogues that rejected Christ, we can imagine the disturbances.

So Claudius expelled many Jews. So Aquilla and Priscilla were in Corinth, making tents and living hand to mouth, as Paul.

In 54, 5 years later, Claudius died, and his edict disappeared, so Jews moved back to Rome. By 57 or so, when Paul wrote his letter to Rome, P and A were back at home in Rome. Paul names them in Romans 16, and greets them warmly.

What I'm trying to do here is give you a feel for the New Testament political world. There was nothing at all like what we call rights and freedoms. The Roman government did bring basic law and order to people, and that's a good thing. But it was fickle at the best of times. They never ever pretended to have our sense of rights and freedoms.

And there were tens of thousands of slaves, including many Jewish slaves, and it was basically open season on them at all times. What regularly happened to slaves was dismal. You could not possibly have fewer rights and freedoms than those slaves.

So we need to understand that although the apostles would have liked our rights and freedoms, their world was nothing like that. Pray for those in authority, said Paul, so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives, in godliness and holiness. That was as good as they could imagine life. Now to three freedom Scriptures, beginning with Romans 6.

Freedom Means Choose your Slavery - Romans 6:15-23

*What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the kind of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*

*I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

The real freedom is freedom from sin. The gospel gave us freedom from sin. We used to be slaves to sin, to death, to impurity, to wickedness. But we obeyed the gospel from the heart, we repented and believed and were baptized, we were forgiven and we received the Holy Spirit. And now we are free from being slaves to sin.

Because Christ died for us and we obeyed the gospel, we can choose not to sin, we can choose righteousness. There is no freedom on earth like that freedom.

It's still hard, and we don't always get it right. Still, we genuinely want to live in God's way, and we often do, and every time we obey God, we live freely. Let's celebrate that we actually want to live right before God, and often do. This is a great freedom and blessing!

This freedom leads to a different slavery. We are all going to obey **something**. What our society calls complete freedom to do whatever we want, the apostle calls being a slave to sin, which produces shame and then death. What western civilization calls freedom, and what the apostles called freedom, are not only different, in some ways they are opposites.

We can be slaves to sin, or we can be slaves to righteousness and God. There is no other way to live on this planet. Every single human is in one of those slaveries. One produces shame and death, and the other brings holiness and eternal life. Choose your freedom, and choose your slavery.

Use your Freedom to be Slaves - Galatians 5:13-15

*You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, through love become slaves to one another. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

The Galatians were Gentile believers, and they were confused about Gentiles belonging to God's people, similar to what we saw last week in Ephesians. Some troublesome Jews had come to the Gentile Galatian churches, and told them that if they kept the Law of Moses, they could be included in God's special nation and have that special citizenship.

So Paul is telling them, with all his might, that Christ freed them from the Law of Moses, they are not under that law. **Christ** makes them part of the special race, through **Christ** they become descendants of Abraham. They are free from the law of Moses.

But what will they do with this freedom? *Do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, through love become slaves to one another.* Most translations say, "through love **serve** one another." But the NRSV translators decided that every time it says "slave" in Greek, they will translate it as "slave." They are the only translation to do that, and I like that. *Through love become **slaves** to one another.*

You are free from the demands of Moses' law, says the apostle. Good. What to do with that? One another, love one another, be slaves to one another. That's where freedom goes. When the apostles talk about "freedom," "freedom" is just the first half of the sentence. The second half of the sentence always gives us a new and better slavery. Now to 1 Peter 2.

## Freedom: Slaves to Public Opinion and to God – 1 Peter 2:11-17

*Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. [And here is one important way to do that:]*

*Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.*

I picked these three texts because I knew they talked about the real Christian freedom. What I did not realize is that they also all talk about a new slavery. That's not why I choose them, but I noticed it once I started reading.

“Live as free people,” says Peter. What kind of freedom does he have in mind? In 1:18, Peter said that we have been redeemed from an empty way of life. We were enslaved to an empty way of life, and the blood of Jesus was the ransom price, the purchase price, to get us out of an empty way of living, and give us a new way of living that was not empty. We're free from that life. This is much like Paul in Romans 6.

Slaves to public opinion: *Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.... For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.*

Paul says similar things in Titus 2: live carefully, “so no one will despise the message of God.” Live “so that those who oppose you may be ashamed, because they have nothing bad to say.” Be trustworthy people, “so that in every way, we can make the teaching about God our Saviour more attractive.”

When I say “slaves to public opinion,” I'll bet that gets your attention. Peter joins our concern about public opinion to being slaves of God. Eyes open to public opinion is part of being God's slaves. What the world sees mattered a lot to the apostles.

The apostles knew that simply worshipping Jesus of Nazareth as Lord of all would offend a lot of people, just by itself. Model citizens in every will be trouble just for devotion to Christ the Lord. The apostles knew that, and so they told believers, “you make sure that is the only thing they have against you. In every other way, be as honest and helpful and agreeable and cooperative as you can possibly be!” That's not really our definition of “freedom,” is it? But for Peter, that goes along with not using our freedom as coverup for evil.

So if we are going to do something that goes against the authorities, or will invite public scorn, we must make very sure we have clear instruction from the Lord. The enemies of the early church criticized them for the Lord's Supper. Eating a body and drinking blood was cannibalism. But believers did not stop observing the Lord's Supper.

In those days, a wife was expected to worship the same god as her husband. Believing wives with unbelieving husbands were seen as trouble makers simply for being Christian when their husbands were not. So the apostles said, "Other than your faith in Christ, be as good a wife as you can be."

Slaves also were expected to worship the same god as their masters, but some slaves were believers and their masters were not. They also were seen as trouble makers and disrespectful, so the apostles said, "follow Christ, and be as honourable a slave as you can be, work for Christ and not your human master." This all expresses freedom as God's word describes it.

### Conclusion

The Canadian charter of rights and freedoms is a good document, and I think the apostles would approve, at least in general terms. But I don't know how much they would care. They had such different priorities, didn't they. Not just different, but in some ways opposite. Personal rights and freedoms don't seem to matter to the apostles.

Let's be clear: I don't enjoy where this is going. I don't like obeying other people's rules any more than you do, and I have gotten around it in too many ways. I am not blameless before God in this. The apostles are talking to me as well. And I am trying to speak for them.

Slaves to God and to righteousness were what mattered. The freedom of the apostles was full of submission. The freedom of the apostles was a new slavery. We are either the new kind of slave, or we're the old kind. No other option on the planet. The freedom of the apostles was paid for by Christ, and given us by God, and no one can ever take it away from us! You have to like that: circumstances can never take away the freedom that the apostles taught and celebrated. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, we present our bodies and our souls to you as living sacrifices. Complete in us the work you have begun. And again we say it, complete in us the work you have begun. And Father, this we know, that we have a deep urge to live in your ways, and often we do. And that comes because we've been redeemed from an old life, and given a new life. We thank you, o God, we thank you. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct our hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give us peace at all times, and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.