

***The Uses of Freedom***  
Galatians 5:13, 1 Peter 2:11-25

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After we are done celebrating freedom with fireworks and a parade, we have to ask ourselves what we are going to do with our freedom. Now that we have it, how are we going to use it?

On July 3, the *New York Times* ran an op-ed piece by the novelist Kurt Andersen. He told about being at the Woodstock Writers Festival last spring—not the most conservative of venues—and someone from the audience asked a question. Why had the revolution of the 60's been won on so many social fronts—rights for women, blacks, gays, sex and rock 'n' roll—but been lost in the economic realm, with old-school free-market ideas gaining traction all the time? Andersen said that his response to the question bummed everyone out. He said that the two things aren't incongruous. It's all of a piece. For hippies as well as for businesspeople, extreme individualism has been triumphant. Selfishness won.

Freedom's just another word for...selfishness. "Do your own thing" is not so different than "every man for himself," Andersen said. One person uses his freedom to smoke weed and watch porn, while another uses his freedom to move his factory overseas. Neither one thinks of how his exercise of freedom affects the larger community.

I'm of just the right age that I was swept up in the tide of freedom-seeking that washed over our culture in 1967 and 68. I was ready for the revolution. Somehow I thought it would be something like the kingdom of God and I fashioned myself a Jesus-hippie, all about peace, justice, and love. But not long after the first wave of counterculture hit Nashville, I noticed the rise of what we called "beer-hippies." They were the guys who wore their hair like hippies and listened to southern-fried rock 'n' roll, celebrated their freedom to drink and use drugs and have orgies, but still held onto their redneck ways, yelling the n word from their pickups. I should have noticed back then that it was really more about selfishness than the coming of a new society.

Thomas Jefferson always assumed that "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" would be balanced by a concern for the neighbor and the nation. He wrote to a friend 38 years after the Declaration, "Self-love is no part of morality. Indeed it is exactly its counterpart. It is the sole antagonist of virtue leading us constantly by our propensities to self-gratification in violation of our moral duties to others." I can't imagine that any of the founders of our nation believed that if you just gave everyone freedom and let them all act in their own self-interest you would produce a just and peaceful society. No, they imagined, however naively, that citizens given the freedom to govern themselves would act in the best interest of the community as a whole.

But I'm afraid Kurt Andersen is right, and selfishness has won. And we're no longer ashamed of it. We make it an ideology. I have every right to make money any way I can. I have every right to have sex any way I can. I have every right to talk any way I want to, no matter how crude or demeaning. Selfishness is the American way, according to this ideology, and the American Dream is getting as much for yourself as fast as you can, your neighbors be damned.

You know, after September 11 the President told us that people were attacking us because they hate our freedom. They hate us because we are free and they are not. That didn't make sense to me then and it doesn't make sense now. Why would you hate people because they

are free? You might be jealous or filled with longing—but not hate. They hate us because of the way we *use* our freedom. They hate us because, as they experience it, we use our freedom at the expense of theirs; because we act selfishly in our foreign policy for economic reasons; and—just as important in the Muslim world—we use our freedom to degrade ourselves morally, promoting loose living and drunkenness to the rest of the world.

The Christian understands that freedom is a good in itself, one of the highest goods, because it is part of what it means to be created in the image of God. To be human is to share some of God's freedom to choose, freedom to create, freedom to love. As we explain the problem of evil to ourselves, we always say that God made us free to do evil because that was the only way he could make us free to love.

The question for us is not whether freedom is good, but what are the good uses of freedom? If it is true, as the New Testament says, that Christ has set us free in some sense, what are we to do with that freedom? Galatians 5:13 gives us some guidance. "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." Already in the early church, Paul had to tell church members who were excited about being free from the Jewish law that they should not use that freedom to indulge their selfish desires. The point of freedom is not that we now have—in the way an adolescent thinks of freedom—the license to do something naughty: get drunk, get laid, whatever. No, Paul says, the point of freedom is that you have been set free from all the things that kept you from loving. Now that Christ has set you free from your old nature and you are no longer bound by the narcissism of your body, turned in on yourself, allow love to control you and make yourself a slave to the people you serve. What we have now is the freedom to *love*; let's use it!

There is a deep irony, of course, in saying that you should use your freedom to become a slave. In 1 Corinthians (9:19) Paul uses the same thought to describe his ministry: "Though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them." In Philippians, Paul tells the church members to have the same attitude as Christ, who was equal with God but used his divine freedom to humble himself and make himself in the form of a slave. Bonhoeffer called Jesus "the man for others." The Christian idea of freedom is that we have been set free to live for others. It is freedom *for others*, not just for ourselves. We have not been set free to use our freedom to satisfy our debauched desires or to make money for ourselves, but to become more fully human as we become more like Jesus.

Later in Galatians 5, Paul lists bad uses of freedom which he calls "works of the flesh," the things we do out of our old selfish nature: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, etc. Those are all ways we can use freedom. If you think about how freedom gets celebrated on Block Island, you can see how a lot of people use their freedom to satisfy the flesh. I see four basic categories in Paul's list: casual sex, flirting with the dark side, fighting—including church fights and political fights, and wild partying. Those are the wrong ways to use your freedom that lead you *away* from the kingdom of God.

But then Paul lists *good* uses of freedom which he calls "the fruit of the Spirit": love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things, but they are all things we freely choose when we live in the freedom of the Spirit. If our own spirits are being influenced by God's Spirit, then in our freedom we become the people we really want to be, people like Jesus. In his commentary on Galatians, Scot McKnight says, "I know of no Christian parent or youth leader, or for that matter any pastor,

who seriously believes what Paul teaches [here], that the sole foundation of Christian ethics is dependency on the Spirit and a life of freedom in the Spirit.” But that’s what Paul says. “Live in the Spirit and exercise your freedom” is something like Augustine’s rule, “Love God, and do what you want.” The Christian life is not a life of following rules but a life of loving God and being in contact with him, then doing what comes naturally out of that relationship.

When we come to our second text in First Peter, the issue is different and Peter’s application is more complicated. But the core idea is the same: “As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.” For Peter, the issue is not being free from rules or Jewish religion, but being free from sins. He says in verse 24, “Christ bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness.” We have been set free not only from the penalty for our sins but from the power of sin in our lives. Christ set us free *so that* we might live righteous lives, which we were unable to do before—lives of love, joy, and peace. Yes, we are free, Peter says, but the last thing Jesus wants us to do is to use our new status as free people as a cover for doing the selfish things. Do not use your freedom, he says particularly, to dishonor someone else. Treat everyone with respect.

Peter is suggesting that our freedom is exercised when we submit, not only when we assert ourselves. I am using my freedom when I submit even to illegitimate authorities—corrupt government, unfair slave owners, unbelieving husband. Peter is telling people to accept the authority of Nero and those beneath him, even though they oppose Christians. If you do good, he says, you will silence the ignorant talk of foolish men, including accusers in the government. As I have learned on Block Island, you cannot silence the ignorant talk of foolish men by defending yourself. You can only silence them by doing good—and, I would add, doing good over a long period of time.

Peter says that Christians are slaves of God, not slaves of Caesar, and our obedience to Caesar is an exercise of freedom. We are, he says in verse 11, aliens and exiles here. We do not *belong* to Rome or to the United States. We belong to God, but we choose to submit to authority for the sake of our witness and so as not to derail God’s plans with our own half-baked revolution.

We are so accustomed to asserting our rights and exercising our freedom by standing up to those who demand anything of us. Can we even imagine that submission is an exercise of freedom?

This question becomes even more difficult when Peter moves to the subject of literal slaves. Slavery in that culture was not like slavery was in our country. It was not race-based; it was not for life; slaves were often highly educated and had a path to full citizenship. Nevertheless there was a major social distinction between slave and free. Peter tells the slaves in the church to be good slaves rather than telling them to try to gain freedom. It’s hard for us to think this way, but Peter assumes that these slaves already *are* free in the way that matters most: they have been set free by Christ from sin and death. Peter is saying that these slaves need to exercise their freedom by enduring nonviolently even when their masters are evil and cruel. Why is that? Just to protect the church from getting in trouble? No, because they will be acting like Jesus.

This is the model Jesus gave us and called us to: when he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten. This is the model of a new kind of freedom: freedom from hatred, freedom from the need to seek revenge. This is an expression of the freedom to love. Even when we are treated unfairly, we can make the free choice *not* to seek our own rights but to be more concerned for our influence on the other person. This is a very risky

teaching that can be misused by employers or spouses or government officials who want to take away your freedom. But the spiritual reality still remains: you can choose to hate your enemy or not. You can choose to love the person who is opposing you. To choose to love is an exercise of freedom.

Of everyone who ever lived, Jesus was the most liberated. Jesus was the most fully human. And he chose the path of submitting to authority while speaking the truth. He chose the path of suffering as an exercise of his freedom to lay his life down of his own accord. The freedom Jesus modeled for us was not the freedom that seeks its own way, but the freedom to do whatever it takes to accomplish the purposes of love.