

Free, But Bound

The Collect.

“O ETERNAL God, through whose mighty power our fathers won their liberties of old; Grant, we beseech thee, that we and all the people of this land may have grace to maintain these liberties in righteousness and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

From a speech by Ben Franklin to the Constitutional Convention, September 17, 1787: “[to President George Washington] Mr. President, ...I agree to this Constitution, with all its Faults, if they are such: because I think a General Government necessary for us, and there is no Form of Government but what may be a Blessing to the People if well administered; and I believe farther that this is likely to be well administered for a Course of Years, and can only end in Despotism as other Forms have done before it, when the People shall become so corrupted as to need Despotic Government, being incapable of any other.”

The American Christian should understand most emphatically, even if he is alone in it, that the terms liberty and freedom carry with them enormous weight. Since flags still line the roads in many communities as Independence Day approaches, and the same speeches, ceremonies, and allusions to the past continue as they have for decades, one might be inclined to conclude that there remains generally among us a knowledge of the implications of proudly declaring ourselves residents of “the land of the free”.

But there can be no claiming of freedom without the acknowledgement that there are bonds to be accepted without which freedom has no meaning. This is a great paradox, but it is one thoroughly understood by our Founders, who framed a system of government whose purpose was precisely to restrain the excesses of men committed through self-interest. They were under no illusion that men invariably operate on the basis of their best instincts. This is grim but necessary realism. It is based upon an assessment of human nature which is certainly confirmed by history. It is admitted regretfully by the humble of heart concerning themselves. But it is also the firm, unapologetic teaching of Holy Scripture.

A people who would declare themselves free and at liberty must first seek to be bound by those things that alone will allow them to claim freedom:

“America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law!”

In these famous lines that are often skipped when *America, the Beautiful* is sung, we are already introduced to two of those things that must bind us: self-control, and law.

Attention to these things is in very short supply, which is why our duty and example to uphold them as Christian Americans has perhaps never been greater. When God is rejected, self-control and law abiding become no more than a pragmatic policy of ensuring one’s own convenience. *Stay out of trouble!* is a line I often hear on the streets, along with a good, stiff slap on the

back. Implied is: “Get away with what you can, but be smart about it!”. It’s not just on the streets, however, that this is being played out—it’s at the highest levels of power. This is a deadly game, the ultimate winner of which is the individual or group that has found a means of getting away with the most while having to face the least in consequence. When these become responsible for framing the laws of the land, a grave national condition has come to pass. Quoting the prophet Isaiah: *judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter* (59:14). Or, as the poet Yeats wrote in his poem *The Second Coming*: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...”.

But the Christian refuses to live life based upon cynical self-interest. He binds himself by another law: *...through love, serve one another. For all the the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Gal. 5:13b-14). Faith in God bestows upon the believer the power and ability to pour out his life on behalf of his neighbor. “One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” “Under God” is the context of a people who claim the gift of independence which the Pledge of Allegiance reaffirms: voluntary submission to His commandments which always yields the best consequences both for others and for ourselves. Other may not know this or even care about it, while blithely appropriating the blessings that were secured for them by others far more mindful of their worth. But a Christian’s life must be an emphatic statement that liberty is indeed confirmed in the glad acceptance of law, especially those divine laws from which all other laws ultimately spring.

For this reason, we must devote ourselves to learning all we can about what it means to be in bondage to God. This is glad service both to God and to man, but it is nonetheless *service*. There will be precious little encouragement for this attitude supplied by anything around us. Worse yet, the church itself may be in vastly insufficient supply of it, for it is too busy accommodating itself to the world in order to gain favor, taking its cues from the world, instead of supplying them. Those who wear the invisible shackles of slavery to God are a marked group. Their scruples are considered out of date, even hostile to the good, and worthy of contempt. They may be permitted to offer service especially when the community finds it expedient, as long as they make no direct allusions to the religious basis of their actions.

What do such people look like? They are *swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath* (James 1:19). They are *peacemakers* (Matt. 5:9). They *mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate* (Romans 12:16a). They are *not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good* (vs. 21). They *love not the world, neither the things that are in the world* (1 John 2:15). They are a people in the very grip of the Spirit of God, and for this reason they are free!: *For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death* (Romans 8:2).

Free to love. Free to stick up for convictions when it hurts to do so. Free to be the nation's conscience, even if that sacred task is abhorred by the nation itself.

God help us, because the country is claiming its legacy of liberty with the spirit of entitlement, instead of anteing up the actual cost of purchasing it as have so many past heroic generations. And like those who get something too easily, it is throwing it away just as thoughtlessly, foolishly assuming that there is an endless supply.

In such times, Christian, feel around your shoulders, your neck, your back. How tight are those bonds that should be chaining you to your God? Are they secure? Or have you instead become tired of His yoke, begging Him to allow you enough slack so that you can do your own thing, at least *some* of the time?

I think there was a time when the country would have been considered well-ordered. Its communities, its institutions, —and most importantly, its families and individual lives—, reflected the wondrous ideal of a nation that had indeed arrayed itself under God. Such a land enjoyed its liberty as something inestimably precious, something hard fought to achieve, and just as hard fought to retain. There was none of that grave disconnect that exists when high principles are rolled out for sentimental display with no intention of paying them the respect of heeding them.

Few of us need to be reminded of the current state of things. We wish we could grab the country by its lapels and say, “Don’t you understand? Liberty and independence are not realities that can somehow survive by themselves, like red, white, and blue balloons floating in the 4th of July air! Not even democracy, without the presence of principle in the hearts and lives of those maintaining it, has even a hope or a prayer for continuing!”

But *whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear* (Ezek. 2:5a), the Christian, like Daniel, still must live *by the law of his God* (6:5). Through faith, he lives out the words of Moses to ancient Israel, binding the law of God for a sign upon his hand, and wearing them between his eyes (Deut. 6:8) wherever he goes. He alone knows that he walks the earth as one utterly bound. To those with eyes to see, his life of joy, virtue, and love are the very epitome of freedom. To live this out daily may be the greatest gift we can give our land in this hour.

When we muse tomorrow on our country's independence, and pause to reflect upon the implications, may we each stop and offer a prayer on our nation's behalf. Our prayers will be heard, and on their basis, God will act.

And meanwhile, as a people free in Christ, we share our Lord's very own mission:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound...

While God yet gives us breath, this is our sacred duty.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.