

Freedom (*eleutheria*)

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The word "freedom" (*eleutheria*) does not occur in the Gospels, though "free" does both as a verb (John 8:32, 36) and as an adjective (Matthew 17:26; John 8:33, 36).

Freedom is the opposite of slavery. Leviticus speaks of "a woman who is a slave, not yet given her freedom" (19:20). Josephus reports that the Sicarii accused people of sacrificing the precious liberty (*eleutherian*) of the Jews, preferring slavery (*doubleian*) under the Romans (*War*, 7, 255).

In Galatians

Paul was a free man who wanted to see others free. In his letter to the Galatians, he speaks of those who spy upon our freedom (2:4) in order to take it away. But our freedom comes from Christ and we must not surrender it. Freedom is our vocation (5:13).

The law of Moses decreed that a Hebrew slave was to serve six years and then be set free for nothing; but if he went back into slavery of his own accord, his ear was to be pierced and he was to serve as a slave for life (Exodus 21:1-6). Paul told the Galatians that this must not happen to them. They had been freed with a price and they must not submit to slavery again. "For freedom Christ has set us free!" (Galatians 5:1).

It was moral and spiritual freedom that Paul spoke of in Galatians, the best kind of freedom.

In 1 Corinthians

Paul speaks again of enjoying moral freedom when he deals with the pressure which others attempt to exert to secure obedience to human regulations and sensitivities. In 1 Corinthians

10:29, he addresses the concerns of those who insisted that diet affects our spiritual nature.

In our day we have almost lost the concept of moral freedom. Refusal to indulge in the popular rituals of gambling, sex, drugs, and affluence is liable to be interpreted as abnormality rather than as continence. And yet the first freedom is freedom of the mind. If we are not free to envision purity, selflessness, goodness, loyalty, or consecration, then we are slaves to the imaginations of others. If the mind is not free, freedom of action is a mockery.

Indeed, it is a mistake to equate freedom with mobility. The size of a cell may affect the *comfort* of the prisoner but it does not alter the *condition* of the prisoner.

A nudist does not have greater freedom than a person wrapped up in warm clothes and wearing skis. In sub-zero weather with six inches of snow on the ground, the ski-clad person is free to go for miles while the nudist must huddle near the warmth of a room. Freedom is not a matter of discarding restraints but of being able to select the right restraints to accomplish our purpose.

The Law of Freedom

James' use of the phrase "the law of freedom" (1:25 and 2:12) may seem like a paradox. It is not. (If he had said "the slavery of freedom," he would have used a paradox.) There is nothing paradoxical about a coherent freedom. Chaos is not freedom. Paul's warning that we must not use freedom as an opportunity for the flesh (Galatians 5:13) and 1 Peter's saying that we must not use freedom as a cover for evil (2:16) are logical extensions of James' idea that there is a law of freedom.

God and Freedom

In theological discussions of freedom of the will, the point is sometimes missed that without God there is no freedom. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17) or, as Jesus said, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). This is fundamental to our understanding of freedom—a fact which often causes confusion when Christians discuss freedom with those who are not. We are the heirs of Christ, the children of God. (Although the *Revised Standard Version* translated *eleutheria* as "freedom," it properly retained the *King James Version's* phrase "glorious liberty of the children of God" at Romans 8:21. One does not abandon excellence for pitiful consistency.) And because we enjoy this glorious liberty, we sometimes have difficulty understanding people who see religion as a system of biblical laws or ecclesiastical obligations, who speak of the merits of good works, who would reject the law of freedom in favor of human contests and human prizes. The Spirit of the Lord does not submit to the dictates of the world. Neither does the Spirit subject us to the demands of the world.

Christian freedom is something which belongs in the area of ethics, Christian education, and pastoral counseling—not evangelism. It is the result of our love of Jesus Christ, not the cause of our love of Jesus. Wishing Christian freedom upon one who is not a Christian is like throwing kisses at someone appearing on a television screen. You won't get through.

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