

THE LINES OF LIBERTY

Securing Freedom in a Free-for-All World

Text: Genesis 1 & 2; James 1:19-27

Original Liberty

From the great Statue that graces New York Harbor in the East... to the wide open plains that beckoned pioneers to the Midwest... to the golden shores that stud our Western coast... there is a word that still rings sacred to all Americans—and that word is “Liberty.” This value is not the property of Republicans or Democrats. It is not simply the playground of the young, or the privilege of the retired. As one President recently suggested, Liberty isn’t even America’s gift to the world; it is the Creator’s intention for all people everywhere.

Perhaps this concept was best expressed in the timeless lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” What I want to ask you this morning is “Where did anyone ever get this idea?” “What did it really mean to them at the start?” And “How does that compare with the popular notion of freedom today?”

If there is any unique contribution made by the founders of this Republic, it was their effort to try to discern a solid and universal basis on which to build the life of a people. As I’ve shared in the past and am happy to furnish to any who write in, many of the Founders drew their vision for life from the pages of the Bible. To an extent almost inconceivable to generations today, even the most irreligious of those who founded this nation was soaked in and permeated by a biblical worldview. It was from the pages of Scripture that they became convinced—despite all of the tyranny and restriction of rights that had been the world’s norm for century upon century—that the Creator of this universe had once had something very different in mind.

Reading the pages of Genesis, the Founders saw that God had created human beings with an “original liberty.” They saw that God had sowed into the original fabric of creation a fabulous freedom. In fact the very first words we hear God speaking to human beings in Genesis 1:28 reflect that spirit of liberality: “And God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth... have dominion over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the air, and over every living thing.’” The original context of life was a Garden so lush and laden with multiple options that tradition came to call it Paradise. “YOU ARE FREE to eat from any tree in the garden,” says God.

You can imagine the first man and woman standing in Eden like children at the gates of Disneyworld with a V.I.P. Pass to the entire park. This is the life that God intended. God is not some stingy Scrooge seeking to narrowly confine our lives. God wants every human being to know a glorious freedom. This is why those who threw off the bonds of royal tyranny at the start of this nation did so with such daring conviction; they were convinced that humanity was divinely intended made for self-governance. This is why

Christians led the fight to abolish slavery in Britain, America, and around the world. This is why, at certain moments, human beings have felt it right to go to war to overthrow dictators. This is why students of God will naturally care deeply about the cause of civil and human rights wherever the essential liberty of humankind is trampled. Always there remains the danger, of course, that the freedom fighters will become the oppressors; but it is the knowledge of original liberty that keeps leading believers—hopefully humbly and with self-examination—into the perilous fight.

The Line Around Life

What the Founders understood, however, is that the liberty God gave humanity came with certain lines to it. First, there was the line God drew AROUND life. It was the line of God's supreme ownership—what theologians call God's "sovereignty." Genesis 1 declares: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness... And God said, 'Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water.' So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it."

Genesis is telling us here less about cosmology than it is about theology. The message here is that the work of creation involved the setting of boundaries, the separating and ordering of things, by the sovereign hand of God. In creating the Garden of life, God drew a line in the midst of the chaos and established within that circle a place of order and fruitfulness. He drew a line around the entirety of human life that was essential to its prosperity. Those of you who've ever fenced off a plot of land to be gardened understand this. You know that without a formal boundary and the overseeing interest of the Owner, any garden will quickly become either a jungle or a desert. It will either be invaded by weeds that overrun it or by predators that strip it clean. Without a line around it and a good Lord above it, there is no Garden—at least not for long.

The Founders understood this about liberty. If I had the time I could give you scores of quotes attesting to their belief that any people who forgot God as their supreme provider and defender were in for serious trouble. This was Abraham Lincoln's concern too as he called this nation to repentance and prayer during the time of the Civil War: "We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own."

In other words, we in America have recapitulated the fall of first man and woman. We've lived in a blessed garden for so long that we've come to think that it just got this way by accident or by our own efforts alone. Lincoln continues: "Intoxicated with success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to God that made us!" That was in 1863. Think of how much further our intoxication had gone by 1963 or by today.

Genesis 2 goes on to say that: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” The message here is that human beings weren’t given full freedom over every single matter in Creation. They were given a delegated authority—a commission to act as stewards of what God had made. In other words, human liberty was to be regarded as a gift and a responsibility—a privilege to be exercised with accountability to the Owner of the Garden himself.

It is easy to forget this. Today people speak of freedom as an absolute right. All the talk is about our entitlements: My right to do what I want with my body, to do what I want with my speech, my technology, my power and money. Nobody should get in the way of my right to pursue my happiness. But where in the talk of freedom today is the tempering sense of responsibility and accountability, so present in an earlier age? Do we not understand as our forbearers did and Jesus promised that one day the Owner will return and require His tenants to give an accounting for what we’ve done with our liberty?

The Lines Within Life

Many of the Founders grasped that God had given human beings an original liberty so good and generous that we should long for all people to have it. They saw that this liberty had a line of sovereign authority around it upon which they were dependent and to which every person and nation will be accountable. But they also respected the fact that God had drawn a line WITHIN the Garden of Eden as well. Genesis 2 reads: “And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from [this tree], for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

Within the context of an absolutely stunning range of choices, God said there some places that human beings were NOT to go. They should not go there either because God said “Don’t” or because God said “Death.” Some things I am asking you not to do simply because I don’t want you to do them. Please honor me in this. Some things I am asking you to do because they will lead to your death. Please trust me in this.

If you are a parent, you likely understand this logic. There are things we ask our children not to do and don’t always explain why. Maybe it’s because the reasons are too complex for our kids to grasp at that stage. Maybe it’s because we are trying to teach our kids the self-control they need to make the best of life. Usually it is because what we are forbidding—as apparently harmless or helpful it may appear to the child—is in fact something which we know from our better vantage point in life will be destructive to them or dishonoring to the family. Good parents draw boundary lines around certain things, not because they are ignorant or stingy, but because they are wise and kind. God is this way—indefinitely so.

And so He says: “You are free to pursue prosperity and material goods but don’t forget to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” You are free to pursue love but don’t give in to fornication, adultery, or sodomy. You are free to admire the blessings of others but don’t become

covetous. You are free to work hard and play hard all week long but don't neglect to set aside at least one-seventh for worship and rest. You are free to pursue your independence but don't stop honoring your mother and father. You are free to use your speech but don't degrade people."

Truly Free

Do these commandments seem harsh to you? One of the secrets to life being lost in our time is the linkage between obedience and freedom. Many people associate obedience to laws with the loss of freedom. But think how long our roads would remain truly free and healthy places if a large number of people felt that their rights superseded most lines and limits. Liberty without law isn't freedom; it is dangerous license. Liberty without law isn't freedom; it is an open door to anarchy or terror. As the Roman Cicero once said: "We put ourselves in bondage to the law so that we may be free." Jesus put it this way: "If you obey my teaching, then... You will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

Abraham Lincoln once went down to the slave block to buy a slave girl. As she looked at the white man bidding on her, she figured he was just another man going to buy her and then abuse her. He won the bid, and as he was walking away with his property, he said, "Young lady, you are free." She said, "What does that mean?" "It means you are free." "Does that mean," she said, "that I can say whatever I want to say?" Lincoln said, "Yes, my dear, you can say whatever you want to say." "Does that mean," she said, "that I can be whatever I want to be?" Lincoln said, "Yes, you can be whatever you want to be." "Does that mean I can go wherever I want to go?" He said, "Yes, you can go wherever you want to go." The girl, with tears streaming down her face, said, "Then I will go with you."

This is the decision that many of the Founders of this country also made. For this reason, when they were freed from monarchy and presented with the chance to set themselves up as kings of this new nation, they chose instead to build a nation founded on biblical principles and a vision of liberty and justice for all. This was no accident. They knew the God who'd created man free. They knew the lines of providence and obedience upon which human life depends. They knew how much the future depended on men and women who, when faced with the option of settling for a culture of mere license, would keep choosing the way of true liberty. As the Apostle James says: "The man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it--he will be blessed." May God bless you and me in this way and, in that fashion, may God bless America.

Genesis 2:16
Genesis 1:3-7
Abraham Lincoln, Presidential Proclamation, March 30, 1893
Genesis 2:15
See Matthew 21:33-41; Matthew 25
Genesis 2:16-17
Elisabeth Elliot, The Liberty of Obedience to God
John 8:31-32
Steve Brown, Preaching Today, #58

