

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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“Freedom”

I Corinthians 9

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So far this year I have preached sermons with one-word titles.
My first was “Happiness,”
my second was “Order,”
and today is “Freedom.”

With these sermons, my goal is not to step away from what is going on in our world but to step back and consider underlying principles and virtues that will help us live faithfully in the midst of what is going on.

In the world around us, there has been a lot of talk of freedoms; freedom
to assemble,
to speak,
to bear arms,
to worship...
and freedom from things like tyranny.

Let’s step back and ask ourselves what it means to be set free in Christ.

For guidance, I go to the ninth chapter of I Corinthians. In this chapter, Paul speaks of freedom in two ways. Listen to the reading for a shift in tone from, “[Oh yes I can,](#)” to “[But I won’t.](#)”

Paul writes:



Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? ² If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

³ This is my defense to those who would examine me. ⁴ Do we not have the right to our food and drink? ⁵ Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶ Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? ⁷ Who at any time pays the expenses for doing military service? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk?

⁸ Do I say this on human authority? Does not the law also say the same? ⁹ For it is written in the law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake, for whoever plows should plow in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? ¹² If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we still more?

Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

¹³ Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed on the altar? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

¹⁵ But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case. Indeed, I would rather die than that—no one will deprive me of my ground for boasting! ¹⁶ If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! ¹⁷ For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

¹⁹ For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. ²⁵ Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I



box as though beating the air; ²⁷ but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

Second Presbyterian's leadership is making plans to get through the pandemic, but also making plans for a post-pandemic future. They are in the good company of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Leading the nation through the Second World War could have consumed the president. Many millions of dollars needed to be raised for the war effort, but Roosevelt already was thinking about what our nation would become when the war was over. He gave a speech in which he cast a vision of a postwar nation that would be founded on four freedoms:

Freedom of Speech,
Freedom of Worship,
Freedom from Want and
Freedom from Fear.

The first two were familiar to Americans because they were about being free from restraint. But the second two freedoms were more pastoral. They spoke to the fears of a nation. *Freedom from Want* spoke to a nation with recent memories of the depression, and *Freedom from Fear* spoke to those worried about harm coming to loved ones during the war.

Both to support the war effort and to help spread the vision of what the nation should become, Norman Rockwell was asked to illustrate the *four freedoms* with *four paintings*. Prints would then be sent to those who purchased a minimum amount of war bonds.

Rockwell wanted to do a good job and, to focus on this project, he was even given a temporary leave of absence at the *The Saturday Evening Post*. For three months, he did not have to supply a painting for the magazine's cover.

It didn't help. Rockwell couldn't focus. He had what you might call "Painter's Block." The four freedoms seemed too lofty as ideals to illustrate. What pictures could he paint that would inspire millions of ordinary citizens to buy bonds just so they have the prints? Two and a half months passed, and Rockwell hadn't produced the first one.

Then, by coincidence, Rockwell attended a local town meeting. He saw a man rise to speak wearing a worn jacket, a flannel shirt and work pants. The man had something to say which he knew would be unpopular. But he said his piece, and those around him listened with respect. That moment of open debate without violence inspired Rockwell. It occurred to him that *lofty ideals become real* when they are ordinary, everyday, local experiences. And so, he painted all four pictures from the perspective of his hometown.

- *Freedom of Speech*: he painted that very man who stood to speak at the town hall meeting.
- *Freedom of Worship*: he painted a sideways view of people in a pew praying.
- *Freedom from Want*: he painted a grandfather placing a platter with a turkey down on a family table.
- *Freedom from Fear*: he painted parents tucking their two children safely in bed.



The prints were an amazing success. People so wanted them that over 131 million dollars' worth of bonds and stamps were sold.

I love how the first two of Roosevelt's freedoms,
the freedom of speech and the freedom of worship,
are about protecting one's individual rights
and how the second two freedoms,
the freedom from want and the freedom from fear,
are about protecting each other.

A lovely balance.

A number of writers—scholars, historians, theologians—are suggesting that we have lost that balance. They wonder if a growing individualism has pushed our country into focusing too much on individual rights and less on the common good.

One of the writers, David Brooks, said this:

“In our culture we think of freedom as the absence of restraint. That's freedom *from*. But there is another and higher kind of freedom. That is freedom *to*. This is the freedom as fullness of capacity, and it often involved restriction and restraint. You have to chain yourself to the piano and practice for year after year if you want to have the freedom to really play. You have to chain yourself to a certain set of virtuous habits so you don't become slave to your destructive desires—the desire for alcohol, the desire for approval, the desire to lie in bed all day.”¹

He then quotes Tim Keller who says that freedom “[is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones](#).” Shockingly, it is the chains you choose that often set you free.

The Apostle Paul would agree. In our chapter he begins where anyone would begin who is arguing for their individual rights. “[Am I not free?](#)” Paul asks.

Take note of the ground on which Paul declares his freedom. You might be shocked to see that the ground on which Paul is declaring his individual rights is his and Barnabas' right to be paid. It wasn't that many years ago that Jesus was born, so preaching the Christian Gospel and establishing Christian communities of faith are not vocations of long standing. Still, the work is worthy of compensation. Paul appeals to logic, he quotes scripture, and he talks about what is fair. I won't re-hash it all, I'll just remind you of some of his more interesting points:

- So what if we're doing something new? Temple priests have been paid for centuries. Shouldn't we?
- Hey, military people don't *pay* for the right to serve. They *get paid*.
- Vineyard owners are going to eat some of their fruit, and those who tend a flock are going to drink some of the milk.

¹ Brooks, David, *The Second Mountain*, p. 58.



- Did you see in scripture where we are commanded to let oxen eat while they are treading out the grain? You know, don't you, that Scripture was really talking about workers deserving to share in the results of their labor?
- I like this one: We are not married, but if we did have spouses, don't you think we would need to feed our families?
- And I love this one because it sounds like Paul is a negotiator for the Pastor's Union, if there was such a thing. He says, "If we have sown spiritual good among you, shouldn't there be material benefits?"

(I'm a pastor with a family to feed, so it makes me want to give Paul a high five... or an elbow bump... or a "thank you" spoken through a mask from six feet and two millennia away.)

(By the way, remember all these points next Sunday when you are asked to vote on a compensation package for our next Associate Pastor.)

Paul's arguments border on the self-interested, but then the chapter takes a major, surprising turn. After Paul makes a well thought out, biblically grounded argument based on what is reasonable and fair, he then says, "But I have turned down being paid by you and I don't want to be paid by you now."

"Well, then what was all that for, Paul? Why did we have to listen to three paragraphs of your arguing for something that you now say you're going to refuse? Can we have that time back?"

Context is helpful here. It is helpful to know that Paul is not in a salary negotiation but is actually *justifying his refusal to accept pay*. He only argues that he is free to accept compensation to justify his refusing compensation. Paul is moving from one kind of freedom—his right to claim what is his—to a higher kind of freedom—his freedom to surrender his rights for the greater good.

You see, Paul loves the whole *divided and conflicted* Corinthian Church. To understand how conflicted is this church, you need to read the entire letter. There is within the community smaller silos of believers who are contending against each other for power and control. For the sake of time, I won't get into the details of those issues—they are about personal behavior, class divides, and who is more spiritual than whom (who is more right than whom)—but each group wants Paul's endorsement. It is possible that some have tried to manipulate Paul by withholding pay which accounts for the first half of the chapter when Paul asserts his right to be paid. But more problematic is the lobbying—those who are trying to pay him but expect his endorsement.

Paul is not going to be corrupted by church lobbyists so he refuses pay, but he is going to continue to love the whole church with all its factions by preaching the Gospel and urging reconciliation. And he is not going to take on other people's enemies as his own.

He is going to be a Jew for the Jews,
and Gentile for the Gentiles
and vulnerable with the vulnerable.



He'll earn his keep by making tents on the side, but he is going to love everyone, no matter their status. And, as evidenced by what he says later in I Corinthians 13 about Love, he expects them to do the same.

And then, Paul steps back just a little bit more to say the most important thing we need to hear today. He talks about the *fundamental freedom* Christians must claim if they truly are going to follow Jesus. He uses a sports illustration to make his point. “**Look at elite athletes,**” he says. “**They excel *not* because they are free to do what they want, but because they choose what not to do. With their freedom, they accept constraints. They say many ‘Nos’—to certain foods and activities that will hold them back. They say many ‘Nos’ to live their ‘Yes.’ They deny themselves to become their best selves.**”

David Brooks talked about the sacrifices pianists make to become great musicians. Think of the sacrifices good parents make for the sake of their children, that good friends make for the sake of their friends, that good citizens make for the sake of the good of the country, that peacemakers make to win reconciliation. All accept constraints so as to be free to love.

If I were to find a text for our chapter that moves from one's individual rights to the greater freedom to love, it would be in the next chapter of I Corinthians when Paul says that “**All things are lawful, but not all things build up.**”²

In light of that statement, let's think about those freedoms we Americans have and ask ourselves the question Paul would ask of us—that Jesus would ask of us: *After we know what is our right to claim, what are we then free to surrender for the sake of love?*

We have freedom of speech. But just because we can lie, gossip, and hurt others with our words, does that mean we should? What truth can we tell, what can we share, that will heal rather than hurt?

We have the right to assemble. But for what purpose? To form our silos against each other? Or maybe

- to gather with loved ones because they are a priority.
- to gather with those with whom we disagree or who are different from us so we can understand each other and build a community together.
- to worship God because we need constant reminders that there is a greater good to serve than ourselves.
- to support a worthy cause, or to do as Paul did and stand with the vulnerable.

We have the right to read and watch what we want. Maybe Christians need to remember the warning of Proverbs that one's eyes are a window to one's soul, that we can become what we choose to see, that if our eyes are drawn to rumors, to lies, to conspiracy theories, to degradation, we'll likely become the gossip, the liar, the deluded, the degraded. Maybe Christians choose instead to direct our eyes to what serves the truth, the greater good and what feeds one's soul.

² I Corinthians 10:23



We have the right to bear arms. But Christians should ask if they should and, if so, what type and for what purpose.

We have the right to own property. It is certainly our right to acquire and to hoard. But Christians need to ask ourselves how we are going to be stewards of what we own. How are we going to take care of ourselves and our loved ones, and then how can we address the issues and problems of the world?

“We live in the land of the free,” say we as Americans. But as Christians, should we not then choose how to be free? Being free in Christ is to say “No” to what is false, what destroys, what is evil and what is selfish; and to say “Yes” to what is true, what heals, what is good, and what is loving. That’s the freedom of those who take up their cross to follow Jesus. They say many “Nos” in order to live their best “Yes.”

Charge and Benediction:

Feel free...

To be kind,

To be just,

To be helpful,

To be loving.

And go knowing that the one who did not think equality with God as something to insist upon, but who took on the constraints of our humanity in order to serve and save us... goes with you.

