

# Freedom Gone Wild

December 2023

Has our society finally reached a point of excessive freedoms? Is that even possible? It seems like the last 50 years in America have been driven by a mad pursuit of individual freedoms – at all costs. Certainly, the internet has accelerated this trend giving every individual their own megaphone, newsroom, platform, brand, and ability to yell and scream about their individual rights and points of view. However, have we finally reached a point of frightening danger where shooting each other with semi-automatic weapons in public places, demanding the elimination of people we don't like in mob-like demonstrations, or bullying or avoiding people we think are weak or different from ourselves has become the norm rather than the exception? Have we forgotten that self-restraint, self-control, and self-sacrifice for the greater good and wellbeing of communities are precious and timeless Christian values? Have we tragically forgotten that the highest ethic in all of Christianity is love, not hate?

The Apostle Paul in the First Century was constantly reminding his flock that pursuing unity, peace, and harmony among themselves was the greatest of their objectives as new believers. Paul taught his followers how to enjoy but not abuse their new, phenomenal, exhilarating freedoms in Christ – for the sake of a greater good in their church communities. They were instructed how to honor all people, respect individual giftedness and differences, and love their neighbors through the prisms of encouragement and respect, not jealousy or hate. For these reasons, Paul wrote these famous words to the people of Corinth, “Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstances.” ( 1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

When I was growing up more than 50 years ago, it seemed like America was a different place. My parents and many of my friends' parents were highly involved in our community serving the village on school boards, hospital charities, coaching teams, and becoming elders in their churches. There was a greater good everyone was pursuing for the sake of our town and country. If anyone was touting themselves too excessively, they were immediately challenged for being self-centered, or lacking humility.

Neighborhood parties would often break out spontaneously. It would be very strange if you didn't know the name of every person living on your street. Today, everyone is so locked up inside their homes, addicted to screens and video games, pursuing vigorously their own individual careers and agendas, you might not meet or even see certain neighbors before they move away.



Individual freedom is a precious gift and pursuit of the Christian life. God gives us the indescribable freedom to exercise our unique giftedness while feeling equal to all other people and establishing our own families and friends with liberty and respect. However, we are also given the high calling of being sensitive to our neighbors and helping those in need. We are never called to lord our gifts or freedoms over another person who is weaker, or who might espouse a view different from our own. We should never allow our individual freedoms to fuel hatred or disrespect. When writing to the people in Rome, the Apostle Paul put it this way, "We who are strong must be considerate of those who are sensitive with these matters. We must not live just to please ourselves. We should help others do what is right and build them up in the Lord. For Christ himself didn't live to please himself. As the Scriptures say, 'The insults of those who insult you, O God, have fallen on me.' Such things were written in the Scriptures long ago to teach us... May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 15:1-4a,5,6)

The Christmas season is a beautiful time of year and provides an opportunity to reconcile with people with whom we have been estranged or are at odds. An enormous amount of love is usually in the air this time of year. People are hungry for closer relationships and community. It is a season which invites us to walk out our front doors and find someone in our neighborhood we don't know and give them home-baked cookies or a handshake



along with glad tidings. As a country we need to wake up and know how seriously close we are to forgetting everything Jesus or the Apostle Paul taught us about how to respect, love, and honor each other. Our individual freedoms are gifts which need to be handled with the utmost care and humility, not as weapons to defeat or humiliate another person.

Another unique and beautiful characteristic of Christianity is the triune nature of our God. God exhibits three different persons of equal divinity and essence with unique roles and missions to serve and save humanity. Christmas is that time of year when we remember the selfless decision of our God to incarnate himself and assume the life of a human so he could dwell amongst us, heal us, and teaches us the ways of salvation. This one bold act was the most powerful example we have in the Christian life of not using individual freedom for selfish purposes or reasons. Jesus could have stayed in heaven making life a lot easier for himself.

Instead, he made the courageous decision to enter the messiness of humanity and his creation to teach us the ways of God -- a decision that eventually cost him his earthly life, but through which we have been given the opportunity to gain new and eternal life.

Paul beautifully describes this most selfless act of God when he wrote his friends in Philippi the following: "Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:3-11)



Our world is filled with war right now. Individuals, nations, and self-interest groups are attacking those who disagree with them with vengeance, terror, and much bloodshed, not just in Israel and Ukraine, but in Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Sudan as well. We Americans need to pray for peace and do all we can to help to seek justice in these dire and tragic circumstances. However, we need to make sure such aggressive and un-Christlike attitudes and behavior do not further infect our own country, too. We need to remember to always seek unity, love, and peace, through God's grace, despite our differences of opinion, strength, or talent. Our American community will always need our humble and willing hearts, minds, and personal involvement, or we might lose the gifts of freedom we have worked so hard to achieve and cherish.

This email blast is my best attempt at walking down the street, with gifts and cookies in hand, knocking on your door and wishing you a joy-filled, Merry Christmas! Sharon and our children join me in these glad tidings. I look forward to a new year filled with true freedom and more opportunities to have fellowship with you in the precious name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.