Understanding Liberty

Is Freedom the Right to Do Whatever One Desires, or the Ability to Do What is Right?

There is a great deal of cultural confusion in America today surrounding freedom and its true meaning. Is freedom the right to do whatever one desires, or is it the right to do what is right?



It is our belief that our nation's founders would be shocked to see what passes for freedom in many aspects of our culture.

In addition to being great advocates of liberty, our founders were also students of history. When they embarked upon the American experiment our founders knew well the failure of past democracies and republics. They often warned that licentiousness, the misuse of freedom, was the downfall of most free societies. Though counterintuitive to us, they knew that individual restraint was a key component to lasting freedom in a society.

The following are just a few of many warnings from our nation's founders about the distortion of liberty, not because they opposed liberty, but because they wanted to preserve it for future generations.

Founding Era Philosophers

“Liberty is the right to do what the law permits.” - Charles DeMontisque, *French philoso pher, 1699-1775, Montisque is often credited with the advocacy of the concept of separation of powers and branches of government, a key component of US government today.*

"Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their appetites . . . Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters." - Edmund Burke*, 1729-1797, orator and author in Great Britain during the time of the Revolutionary War who was supportive of the American cause.*

"What is liberty without wisdom and without virtue? It is the greatest of all possible evils; for it is folly, vice, and madness, without tuition or restraint." - Edmund Burke

"Liberty will not long survive the total extinction of morals." - Samuel Adams

"Liberty considers religion as the safeguard of morality, and morality as the best security of law and the surest pledge of the duration of freedom." - Alexis de Tocqueville, *1805- 1859, French statesman and philosopher who wrote Democracy in America.*

The Founders

"Without liberty, law loses its nature and its name, and becomes oppression. Without law, liberty also loses its nature and its name, and becomes licentiousness." – James Wilson, Of the Study of the Law in the United States, 1790, *Wilson was a signer of the Declaration, a constitutional delegate, congressman and one of the six original justices appointed by George Washington to the Supreme Court of the United States.*

"The known propensity of a democracy is to licentiousness, which the ambitious call, and the ignorant believe to be, liberty." - Fisher Ames*, 1758-1805, Congressman, House author of the 1st Amendment, The Dangers of American Liberty (1805)*

"Knowledge is, in every country, the surest basis of public happiness . . . to discriminate the spirit of liberty from that of licentiousness - cherishing the first, avoiding the last."

- George Washington, *January 8, 1790, from his First Annual Message to Congress.*

*"*Perfect freedom consists in obeying the dictates of right reason, and submitting to natural law. When a man goes beyond or contrary to the law of nature and reason, he introduces confusion and disorder into society . . . [thus] where licentiousness begins, liberty ends." - Samuel West*, Revolutionary war chaplain and Constitutional Delegate from Massachusetts.*

"He therefore is the truest friend to the liberty of his country who tries most to promote its virtue, and who, so far as his power and influence extend, will not suffer a man to be chosen into any office of power and trust who is not a wise and virtuous man...The sum of all is, if we would most truly enjoy this gift of Heaven, let us become a virtuous people." - Samuel Adams*, known as the father of the American Revolution, Adams was a signer of the Declaration and the 4th Governor of Massachusetts*

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"We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." - John Adams*, Address to the military, October 11, 1798, cousin of Samuel Adams, primary author of the Constitution of Massachusetts, member of the Continental Congress, Vice President to George Washington and 2nd President of the United States.*

"To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical [*imaginary*] idea." - James Madison *speaking during the Virginia Ratifying Convention, 20 June 1788. Madison is known as the "Chief Architect of the Constitution," 4th President of the United States.*

"So true is this, that civil liberty cannot be long preserved without virtue." - Rev. John Witherspoon*, Signer of the Declaration, member of Congress and President of Princeton College.*

"The only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in religion. Without this there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments." - Dr. Benjamin Rush, *Signer of the Declaration.*

"Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters."- Benjamin Franklin*, 1706-1790, Signer of the Declaration.*