

A Christian's Bill of Rights

It was an intimate gathering in the early 1980's – just President Ronald Reagan and me – and approximately 11,000 more of his close personal friends at Lloyd Noble Arena in Norman, Oklahoma. President Reagan told this story:

As was his habit, the distinguished Senator quietly placed a quarter on the table as he walked by on the way to his office. He never took a cookie -- didn't even like them -- but he appreciated the woman's entrepreneurial spirit and couldn't resist this small token to help her earn a living. Weeks passed and they barely acknowledged each other; the woman, there every morning with her freshly baked goods, and the Senator, quietly placing the quarter on the table and quickly walking off without a word.

Then one morning, after leaving his quarter, the Senator heard a voice behind him calling. It was the woman, chasing after him. He turned, and raising his hand in protest told the woman there was no need to thank him, he was just pleased to give her that small token each day in appreciation of her efforts. The woman, with a puzzled look on her face, said, "Oh, no, I just wanted to tell you that the price of the cookies is now thirty-five cents."

And just like that, the woman turned a privilege, a gift into a right.

This time of year, with elections just two days away, my mind goes to things national and political. 21 years ago, with the destruction of the Twin Trade Towers in New York on 9-11-2001 by terrorists, our national pride was put to the test -- and we passed with flying colors.

Pride we have. Indignation we demonstrated. Who do they think they are that they can assault us in this way? Haven't they heard of our might? Don't they know we represent all that is right in this world? Know they no measure of our spirit? Our land was and continues to be filled with pride, anger and indignation mixed with the bitterness, sadness and ache of losing loved ones. We still hunger for vengeance and mourn our dead.

But who do we think we are? I grieve with those who lost loved ones, but the real tragedy is those who died without knowing Jesus. I ache with those who will never see a dear one again, and I do not condemn their emotions. But the overwhelming majority of us didn't feel this loss personally, yet our outrage remains. Just who do we think we are?

Deep in our hearts, we actually believe we deserve better. We seem to think ourselves immune to the chaos that infects the rest of the world. We have become so accustomed to our comfort and pleasure that we -- like the ungrateful cookie lady -- actually think we deserve them. We have so deluded ourselves with self-indulgence that we believe the blessings we enjoy are of our own doing. We have turned our blessings and privileges into rights – one might even say - certain unalienable rights.

Lately, in the light of recent political developments, I've been thinking about my privileged status. I am an American, and consider it a great privilege to have lived my entire life here in the United States. I am also a Christian, and consider it an even greater privilege to have been redeemed by the blood of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

But sometimes I confuse the privileges of one with the other. Sometimes I allow myself to think that my rights as an American are also my rights as a Christian. I'm not sure that's a good thing. So I decided to examine some early documents from the founding of our country in which I have experienced such great privilege.

Consider the opening two paragraphs from the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America.

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

My purpose today is not to critique the Founding Fathers nor conclude whether the actions taken almost 250 years ago were right or wrong. That's clearly not my responsibility, and I have plenty to do to merely evaluate my own actions.

What I intend to do is examine Scripture to see what we as Christians can expect as our rights, by virtue of the atonement bought for us by Jesus' blood, and how those blood-bought rights correspond to the rights delineated in the text above. I propose to present you with a Christian's Bill of Rights.

The previous text mentions that we are "*endowed by (our) Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*"

These are indeed my rights as an American – I'll not debate that issue. My question is: Are these my rights as a Christian?

Life. As a Christian, do I have a right to life?

We'll all agree that it is God and God alone who grants life to all living things for as long as He wills. But is that my right, or is it my privilege? Is my life under my control, or is it subject to the control of the One who granted it to me? Life? A right to life? Is not life a gift given to us only to be returned to the Giver of Life in service?

My problem is that I extrapolate this gift of life into a right not to die, a right to live my life as I see fit, a right to do anything I desire with my life, a right for self-preservation, a right for self-fulfillment, a right to personal expression, a right to be me, or any other similar perversion.

I read in Scripture that the one who loses his life for the cause of Christ is the one who finds life.

Matthew 16:25 For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it.

I read that I am to die to myself that I may live for another.

John 12:24-26 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal.

John 15:13 Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

In Philippians 1:21 I read that to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Ephesians 2:10 For we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

It seems that if we have a right, it is probably the right to die to ourselves and give our lives in service to our Lord.

What about liberty? Don't we as Christians have a right to be free? Freedom from bondage of any kind?

I believe this is an illusion, for true liberty has nothing to do with a lack of physical restraints. In fact, I'd suggest that an abundant allowance of blessings and privileges may actually cause us to be all the more bound up by the fear of losing some of the blessings and privileges. The less we have, the less we have to lose, and the more

we are likely to take a risk. After all, when we have nothing, what do we have to lose?

One of the most free men who ever lived demonstrated his freedom while in prison by referring to himself as Jesus Christ's bond-servant (Romans 1:1)-- one who has totally and willingly given himself in service to the One who has done for him what he cannot do for himself. Sure, we Christians have liberty, but don't be misled; we will serve someone or something -- we will be slaves of a sort. The liberty comes in the choice of masters – and we can only serve one.

What about the Pursuit of Happiness? Don't we as Christians have the right to the Pursuit of Happiness? The right to pursue what pleases us?

I suppose I could grant the right of pursuit, but here's the two problems I have with the Pursuit of Happiness. First of all, we have turned the pursuit of happiness into a right to be happy. That is, I don't want anything to happen to me that makes me unhappy – or uncomfortable – or embarrassed – and I don't want to actually work at achieving this happiness – I want it to be given to me – often at the expense of others.

And the second problem I have with this happiness thing is, often we use the wrong gauge to measure our happiness – that being physical circumstances. I don't read this in Scripture.

What I do read is that we have an opportunity and a privilege to so whole-heartedly pursue the purposes of God, that our external circumstances become irrelevant in determining our state of happiness.

Philippians 4:11-12 Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.

This is called contentment, not happiness, and, when this contentment is realized, it creates in us the joy of the constant presence of God in our lives that strengthens us and enables us to rise above circumstances. The joy of the Lord should be our strength (Nehemiah 8:10) rather than the pursuit of personal happiness being our goal.

Our blessings and privileges are now rights which we expect and demand, and we squeal loudly when any are withheld or removed. We credit ourselves in our plenty, and blame all around in our need. We are a blessed nation, but we are not humble. We are a privileged nation, yet we are not thankful. We fail to understand, as did Nebuchadnezzar (see Daniel 4:33-37), that what we have, and even what we seemingly have accomplished, is not really of our own doing, but rather the blessing of Almighty God.

So, what if we are suddenly stripped of these unalienable rights? What if we American Christians are suddenly plunged into the morass of economic decay, civil unrest and political uncertainty that most of the world suffers daily? Would our world suddenly stop? Would we be forced to invest our faith in something or someone greater than ourselves? Would this be a "bad" thing?

I love my country and would voluntarily live nowhere else, but it pains me to see ungratefulness and self-pride clothed in red, white and blue. This is a time for thankfulness, humility, and repentance -- a time to acknowledge individually and corporately that "the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes, and sets over it the lowliest of men." (Daniel 4:17)

What is it that makes us think we deserve more than 95% of the rest of the world's population? We have and enjoy our unbelievable blessings only by God's grace, and indeed, we may be the lowliest of men.

Now is a time to pray for our country and our leadership to fulfill its responsibility to be a minister of God to us for good. (Romans 13:1-4) But not with pride and indignation, thinking we don't deserve any adverse circumstances, but rather in humility and thankfulness for what God has graciously given us as Americans and as Christians, and with repentance for where we have strayed from God's ways, asking God to cleanse us first. And let's not assume that God is on our side, but seek and pray to be on His.

Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness?

Life – sure if we understand that we can only find true life after we've been crucified. Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

Liberty – sure if we understand that true freedom is being a bond servant living in the presence of God's Holy Spirit, and that the greatest liberty is freedom from bondage to my own sin through the blood of Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 3:17 Now the Lord is the Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, is liberty.

Pursuit of Happiness – sure if we understand that true happiness – that is contentment – doesn't come from our circumstances or earthly things, but only comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Philippians 3:7-8 But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.

In light of all this, I'd like to propose a Christian's Bill of Rights. Perhaps I should call them privileges rather than rights, but this should give you some ideas. I expect you'll add to this list, but consider these.

The right to give your life in service to others rather than living for yourself.

Mark 10:43-44 But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave to all.

The right to carry others' burdens. Gal. 6:2 Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

The right to tribulations. John 6:33 These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage, I have overcome the world.

The right to consider others as more important than yourself. Phil. 2:3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;

The right to lay down your preferences and defer to another. Phil. 2:4 Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

The right to lose your personal identity. Gal 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.

The right – if you're worthy enough – to suffer for Christ. Acts 5:40-41 . . . and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, complaining that their rights had been violated . . . NO! rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

The right to forgive. Matt. 18:21-22 Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

The right to wait. Ps. 27:13-14 I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the Lord.

That's just a few of the rights Jesus purchased for us through His atonement!

And, at no additional cost, I'll also add what rights you don't have as a Christian:

You don't have the right to live your life for yourself and do anything you want, anytime you want.

1 Cor. 6:19-20 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

You don't have right to express your preferences or liberties at the expense of another. 1 Cor. 8:9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

You don't have right to be offended. Prov. 19:11 A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression.

You don't have right to be unforgiving – to carry a grudge. Heb. 12:15 See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.

This next one might be a bit hard for some of us to handle, but we do not have the right to be anxious. 3 times in Matthew 6, Jesus says, “Do not be anxious”, or “Do not worry”. Please don't sugar-coat this as care or concern. If worry or anxiety is controlling your life, you need to give up that right and turn it over to God. Perhaps we'll speak more about this at another time.

And maybe then there's maybe the scariest right you don't have – I added it this morning so it won't be on the screen – and it's perhaps the one we all think we do have – the right to privacy!

Jesus tells us in Matthew 12: 2-3 But there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. Accordingly, whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops.

There are various other rights you don't have. 2 Cor. 12:20-21 . . . strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance disturbances . . . impurity, immorality and sensuality.

And finally, contrary to our legal system, you don't have the right to be silent. Acts 1:8 You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall

be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and as far as the remotest part of the earth.

But that's not all. Here are a few additional rights – or more correctly, privileges - you do have as a redeemed child of God – but you may have to wait a while before they are all realized.

The privilege to be called sons of God

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Gal. 3:26

The privilege of an inheritance

For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. Heb. 9:15

The privilege of eternal life

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. John 3:16

The privilege of a crown of life

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. Rev. 2:10b

The privilege of a pain-free life

and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." Rev. 21:4

The privilege to become partakers of the divine nature

For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. 2 Peter 1:4

The privilege to reign with Jesus

If we endure, we will also reign with Him 2 Tim. 2:12

Let me encourage you to take another look at your circumstances anytime you feel your rights have been violated or you feel you have a right to behave in a certain way. Ask yourselves if “your right” is a Scriptural right, and if you have Scriptural basis for behaving like you think you have a right to behave. And in that moment, please remember the awesome privileges you have as a believer in Jesus Christ.

If you’re like me, you’ll find out often you’ve been culturally infected and have most likely turned a privilege into a right or are trying to justify your behavior by calling it a right. May the Lord have mercy on us all.

Lord Jesus, as we prepare to celebrate the atonement you made for us, enable us, through the power of your Holy Spirit, to lay down the rights we think we deserve and embrace the rights and privileges you purchased for us through your shed blood. Amen