

119

MINISTRIES

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Freedom of Speech in the Bible

“Free speech” is a term that we see thrown around a lot, especially in politics. In the United States, citizens have the right to “freedom of speech,” which is described in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. That Amendment states:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The idea behind this right to freedom of speech is that the government cannot punish people for saying bad things about the government. If a U.S. citizen doesn’t like the way the government is behaving, and wants things to change, he can say so openly without fear of punishment, or at least that’s the idea. The U.S. has elections, in which the people can peacefully replace one leader with another leader. But, if the people were not free to speak against their leaders, then the election process simply would not work. Consequently, many Americans consider freedom of speech to be a fundamental and essential right of the people.

Here at 119 Ministries, our concern is not with what America considers to be right, but with what the Bible teaches. So, in this teaching, we’re going to look at the idea of freedom of speech, but we are going to consult the Bible rather than the U.S. Constitution. The First Amendment governs the speech of the citizens of the United States, but the Bible governs the speech of the citizens of God’s kingdom. We have lots of freedom of speech under America’s laws, but how much “freedom of speech” do we have under *God’s* laws? As Christians, are we free to speak against our government? Are we free to speak against people in general? How much freedom of speech do we really have?

In the Bible, we are given several warnings about criticizing our leaders. Consider this verse from Ecclesiastes:

Ecclesiastes 10:20

Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter.

This verse does not say that speaking against powerful people is a sin, but it does advise against it. Why? Because those powerful people might become aware of your criticisms, and you might suffer consequences for it. Peter says something similar in his first epistle:

1 Peter 2:12-17

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

We explore this passage in much greater detail in our teaching, [Life In Exile: Behaving Honorably Among the Gentiles](#). But, in this teaching, we're focusing on just what this passage might have to say about our speech. Peter says to submit to human institutions and even to honor the emperor. This would mean *not* speaking against these institutions. Why? So that the Gentiles cannot say that you are evildoers. Peter lived in a Roman society that was already very hostile toward Jews. If Christians developed a reputation for being troublemakers, then this would cause two problems: it would lead to unnecessary persecution, and it would misrepresent God to the world. Paul says much the same thing in Romans:

Romans 12:14-18

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Much like Peter, Paul says to live peaceably and honorably before everyone, including those who persecute you. The purpose here is much the same: to avoid unnecessary trouble, and to properly represent God to the world. Ecclesiastes, Peter, and Paul all say that cursing the powerful people who can persecute you is not advisable.

So, how can we apply these passages to ourselves? Should we take them to mean that Christians cannot say anything bad about the powers that be? Should we exercise our “freedom of speech” to criticize our rulers, or should we avoid criticizing them, so that we are never at risk of their wrath?

Before we proceed, there is something important that we should point out. Peter was not saying to do everything that the emperor commands, nor was Paul saying to do everything that your persecutors command. The point they are making is that a Christian should not stir up trouble when it isn't necessary. But, there is something that is more important than avoiding trouble with human authorities, and that is obeying God. If we should honor the earthly authorities, how much more should we honor the heavenly authority? And if we should strive to keep the peace with ungodly people, how much more should we strive to keep peace with God himself? When God commands us to do something, we should do it, no matter what any earthly authority says. Peter and Paul's point is not that we should submit fully to the earthly authorities, but that we should submit to them unless they tell us to do something that defies God's authority. Consider the example of Joseph. Joseph served in the house of Potiphar, who was not a follower of God. Joseph was considered a good servant (Genesis 39:2-4)—he probably did

everything that Potiphar and his wife asked of him. But when Potiphar's wife asked Joseph to dishonor God by committing adultery, Joseph refused (Genesis 39:7-9). He obeyed his human authorities unless they asked him to defy God's authority. Peter and Paul are telling us to behave the same way. They are not saying that the human authorities should be served like God; they are saying that we should get along with them as much as possible *without* disobeying God. Remember that Peter also said:

Acts 5:29

But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."

So, with the understanding that we should obey God first, and man second, we can ask again: should we, as Christians, speak freely and criticize our rulers? Or, should we avoid doing so?

As we consider this question, another thing worth mentioning is that we live under a different kind of government and culture than Peter and Paul did. They lived under the Roman government, and in that system, the emperor had supreme authority. The emperor was not elected by the people; the people could not decide that they were tired of him, and that they wanted a better emperor to replace him. Whoever was in power could be expected to remain in power for a long time. In that system, if you irritated the person in power, you could expect to face serious repercussions. However, in the democratic systems that many of us live in today, this is not always the case. While there are life-long politicians, who remain in power for decades on end, there are also many politicians who are voted in and then voted out. The system is designed to give the people a say in who governs them and for how long. In America especially, the existence of the First Amendment makes it clear that America wants people to speak against their elected officials. It is not unusual at all for Americans to criticize their leaders, and they are not supposed to be punished when they do. It is not considered dishonorable for an American to criticize his leaders; in fact, that's a normal part of American culture. So, the consequences for us speaking against our government are much less severe than they were in the first century. Christians in America are not at the same risk of persecution that Christians in ancient Rome were. So, we should bear that in mind as we seek to gain wisdom from Peter and Paul's words. Today, we can get away with saying much more than the Christians in the first century could.

Now, should we take this to mean that Christians living in a democratic system can say whatever they want? No, not at all. Peter explicitly warns us not to use our freedom as a cover-up for evil (1 Peter 2:16). There is speech that God considers evil in any context. For example, we should never criticize someone by saying things that are *false*. Many scriptures say this, but here are just a few:

Exodus 23:1-3

You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.

Leviticus 19:11-12

You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD [YHWH].

Colossians 3:8

But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

Spreading false rumors and making false accusations is wicked, and should never be done. So then, what about accusations that are true? Can we criticize those in power by saying things about them that are true? We know that there were many prophets who did exactly that. To name a few, Moses spoke against Pharaoh (Exodus 9:30), Elijah spoke against King Ahab (1 Kings 18:18), Jeremiah spoke against King Zedekiah (Jeremiah 21:1-7), and John the Baptist spoke against Herod (Mark 6:18). These prophets were all speaking the truth, and it was right of them to do so. This shows us that there are times that God actually expects us to speak against the wickedness in the world. However, it is worth noting that these prophets all faced persecution because of their speech. Persecution can be considered a blessing when we are persecuted for doing the right thing, but it is not a blessing when we are persecuted for doing the wrong thing. Peter warns that we should avoid this kind of persecution:

1 Peter 4:14-15

[If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.](#)

There is a difference between boldly saying what needs to be said, as God's prophets did, and foolishly meddling in affairs that will only cause trouble. If you suffer for doing what's right, then that is commendable, but if you suffer because you are a fool, then that is not. There is a time to speak up, and a time to be silent (Ecclesiastes 3:7). So, how can we know the difference? When should we speak the truth, and when should we be silent? Well, the best advice we can give is to study God's word and get to know what God wants. Continually seek wisdom and the fear of YHWH. That way, you will know which things are important to God, and which things are not. This will give you insight into when it is appropriate to speak out against things. Then, if you do decide to speak up, be very thoughtful about the words you use. Remember:

Ecclesiastes 10:12

[The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him.](#)

Also, keep in mind that, as a Christian, you are representing God's word with your words. You don't want to portray God falsely, or to bring shame upon his name. That's a heavy responsibility, and something we should all take very seriously.

One last thing we want to mention is, we should not extend our idea of freedom of speech to the way we talk about our brothers and sisters in Christ. The Bible does not contain any First Amendment. We do not choose our brothers and sisters like we choose our elected officials, and we cannot speak against them like we would speak against elected officials. The Bible does call our brothers the "elect," but we don't elect them; *God* elects them. Consequently, God is the one who has the right to speak against them:

Romans 8:33

[Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.](#)

God has very harsh things to say about those who cause strife between brothers. We go into greater depth on this in our teaching, [The Evil Tongue: What is Lashon Hara?](#), but here is just one verse that shows how seriously God takes this issue. Sowing discord among brothers is likened to shedding innocent blood:

Proverbs 6:16-19

[There are six things that the LORD \[YHWH\] hates, seven that are an abomination to him:](#)

haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.

So, as careful as we should be about criticizing our government, we should be even more careful about criticizing our brothers in Christ. One is not advisable; the other is a grave sin. This is not to say that we cannot ever make criticisms—we can, and the prophets often did. But we should not take this matter lightly, and we should seek God’s wisdom before opening our mouth.

So, in conclusion, how much freedom of speech do Christians have? Are we free to speak against our government? Well, yes, but the Bible is much more strict than the First Amendment. While we should always obey God rather than man, and there is a time and a place to call out wickedness in our leaders, we should be careful about how we do so. We should ensure that the things we say are true, and not false accusations. If they are true, we should use wisdom, and ascertain whether God wants us to say something, or whether we just have opinions that we feel like airing out. While we may not face the same kind of harsh punishment that Christians did in the first century, we will face consequences of some kind when we irritate our leaders. If we suffer for doing God’s will, then that is commendable, but if we suffer for acting foolishly, then we’re basically just getting what we deserve. If we’re going to suffer, then we should make sure that it’s for a good cause—for God’s cause. We should be bold and courageous when it is time to speak, but when it isn’t, we should be silent instead. For the sake of God’s name, and for the well-being of Christians everywhere, we should all seek the wisdom to know the difference.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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