

Happy Birthday USA

Andy Stanley · Galatians 5:13-15

AT A GLANCE

America's founders built a system aimed at maximum liberty, not a Christian nation — and they knew it carried a hidden vulnerability: law alone cannot sustain what only virtue can preserve. Andy Stanley argues that the people most positioned to supply that virtue are Jesus followers, because leveraging freedom for others rather than hoarding it for oneself is not a civic nicety but the explicit command of their King.

- The founders' North Star was liberty, not Christianity — the differentiator from England was the form of government, not the faith.
- John Adams warned that the Constitution is wholly inadequate for any people without a shared moral consensus anchored to something transcendent.
- Seventy percent of Americans claim to be Christian; if they actually followed Jesus's teaching, the character crisis threatening liberty would largely dissolve.

“Liberty rises and falls on the choices we the people make every single day.”

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

[Galatians 5:13-15](#) — My brothers and sisters, God chose you to be free. But don't use your freedom as an excuse to do what pleases your sinful selves. Instead, serve each other with love. The whole law is made complete in this one command: “Love your neighbor the same as you love yourself.” If you continue hurting each other and tearing each other apart, be careful, or you will completely destroy each other. (ERV)

The argument

The Founders' North Star Was Liberty, Not a Christian Nation — Breaking from England meant rejecting theocracy, not rejecting faith

Andy Stanley opens by establishing what the founding generation was actually reacting against. England in the 18th century was, by any measure, a robustly Christian nation — it had a national church, held to the divine right of kings grounded in Scripture, and even funded the

King James Bible. The colonists read that same Bible, attended the same kind of churches, and prayed to the same God. The differentiator, Andy Stanley insists, was not religion but politics: the founders rejected the idea that any leader could claim to speak for God and thereby accumulate unchecked power. Their experience taught them that the moment a king or party claimed divine authority, liberty was forfeit. So they anchored government not to God but to the consent of the governed, as the Declaration states plainly. As Andy Stanley summarizes: "Religion was not the founder's North Star. It was, in fact, liberty — including religious liberty."

Insight — Conflating national faith with national founding obscures the founders' actual and more durable gift: a structure designed to protect liberty precisely by refusing to let any human claim to speak for God.

Paper Cannot Govern a People Without Virtue — The founders' own admission of their system's potential fatal flaw

Andy Stanley turns to what the founders themselves said about the weakness built into their creation. John Adams wrote that the Constitution "was made only for a moral and religious people" and that it is "wholly inadequate to the government of any other." George Washington's farewell address named "religion and morality" as "indispensable supports" for political prosperity. The logic, as Andy Stanley frames it, is that elected officials are sworn to a document — a piece of paper — and paper cannot compel virtue. A self-governing republic requires a virtuous governed class, and virtue cannot be mandated. Winston Churchill's observation that "democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others that have been tried" sharpens the point: the very people-dependence that makes democracy precious is also what makes it fragile. The character of citizens is a variable the government has no lever over.

Insight — Every generation inherits a form of government but must supply its own moral consensus; the architecture can protect liberty only as long as the people inhabiting it choose to be something more than legally compliant.

Liberty Mistaken for Entitlement Devours the Community That Granted It — Paul's Galatians warning as a diagnosis of national self-destruction

Andy Stanley anchors the civic argument in Galatians 5:13-15, where Paul tells his readers they were called to be free — then immediately warns them not to use that freedom to indulge themselves. The principle Andy Stanley draws out is that "can do" does not equal "ought to." Every legal option is not a moral obligation. When people retreat to their rights — nothing illegal, nothing you can make me do — and ask only how low they can go, they begin eroding the very context that granted them freedom. Paul's image of people who "bite and devour each other" is, Andy Stanley notes, graphic in the Greek: two wild animals locked in a death struggle over a scrap. He translates it plainly: "Selfishness divides. Selflessness unites." The trajectory of a community that leverages liberty only for self-interest ends in the destruction of the shared

life that makes liberty possible.

Insight — The question "what can I get away with?" is not the expression of freedom but the beginning of its erosion — because freedom exercised only for self-interest consumes the community that sustains it.

The Remedy Cannot Be Legislated — It Must Be Chosen — Why Jesus followers are the group most positioned and most obligated to supply what law cannot

Andy Stanley is careful: selflessness cannot be mandated, only chosen. That is both the problem and the opening. Roughly seventy percent of Americans claim some form of Christian identity. If that cohort actually followed the teaching of Jesus — which Andy Stanley defines not as believing a set of propositions but as living as a follower of a king — the character deficit would largely close. Paul's counter-instruction in Galatians 5:13 is the marching order: use your freedom to serve one another humbly in love. Andy Stanley draws a direct line to Jesus's own words: the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. The king reversed the order of power. His followers are asked to do the same.

"Leveraging liberty for the benefit of others," Andy Stanley concludes, "is the way of Jesus."

Insight — Christians are not merely invited to model civic virtue — they are commanded to, because serving others with their freedom is what it means to follow a king who spent his own freedom on them.

Stewardship, Not Guilt — The Proper Response to Inherited Liberty — Gratitude that becomes responsibility rather than comfort that becomes complacency

Andy Stanley closes without shame and without naivety. He acknowledges that for most Americans, liberty is as invisible as air — taken for granted precisely because it is constant. He does not scold; he reframes. The founders knew the experiment was fragile. They knew it would require more than paper. They built accordingly and warned accordingly. Our task, Andy Stanley argues, is not to feel guilty for privileges we did not earn but to feel responsible for a gift others paid for in full. The prayer he offers captures the posture: "I pray that we would never feel guilty for the liberty and the opportunities and the privileges we have. I pray that we wouldn't feel guilty — we would feel responsible." The invitation is to move from passive beneficiary to active steward — to choose daily what liberty is for.

Insight — Gratitude for unearned freedom matures into responsibility when we recognize that the experiment continues only as long as we the people choose to work it.

Cross-references

- [Matthew 20:28](#) — Andy Stanley quotes Jesus — the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve — as the model for leveraging power and freedom in the direction of others rather than oneself.

Two hundred fifty years is a long time to hold an idea together. The idea the founders held was deceptively simple — that people, ordinary people, could govern themselves if they were willing to govern themselves. Not their neighbors. Not their enemies. Themselves. What they built was extraordinary. What they admitted was more extraordinary still: the paper would not be enough. The words would not hold the weight. Something below the law had to hold the law up — some shared sense that there is a way things ought to be, that there is a divine ought and a divine ought not, and that no one gets to opt out of it simply because no one can arrest them for it. Freedom, it turns out, is not the absence of constraint. It is the presence of character. It is choosing — again, in small things, in ordinary moments — to use what you are free to do in the direction of someone other than yourself. You don't have to tell the truth. You should choose to. You don't have to be faithful. You should choose to. You don't have to show up fully for the people who depend on you. You should choose to. This is the way of the King who used his freedom to die for the people who owed him obedience. He reversed the order of things. He said the greatest among you will be the servant of all, and then he demonstrated it so completely that we are still living in the reversal. To follow him is to pick up that logic and carry it into Tuesday. Into the office, the home, the neighborhood. Not because the law requires it. Because the King modeled it — and because freedom stewarded for others is the only kind of freedom that lasts.

Reflection

- Where in your daily life are you currently asking "what can I get away with?" rather than "what ought I to do?" — and what would change if you flipped the question?
- The founders feared that a self-governing republic would fail without virtuous citizens. What specific habits or choices in your own life are currently contributing to that foundation, and which ones are quietly eroding it?
- Andy Stanley draws a direct line between following Jesus and the health of the communities we inhabit. Where is your freedom — time, influence, resources, voice — positioned primarily toward your own benefit, and how might you reorient even one of those toward serving someone else this week?

Closing prayer

Father, thank you for the extraordinary men and women who paid a price we can only read about and try to appreciate. We are blessed, and in many ways we are spoiled by the liberty they handed us. We pray that we would never feel guilty for what we have been given — but that we would feel the weight of responsibility it carries. Open our eyes. Open the eyes of those in this room, those in our churches, and those who lead our nation. Give us wisdom to know what to do with this gift. Make us a people who choose to serve rather than consume, who leverage our freedom for others rather than hoard it for ourselves — because that is the way of the One we follow. Be a beacon through us. And may what we

reflect be the light of the One who gave his life so that we could be free. In Jesus's name, amen.

FORMATION

One thing to remember

Liberty is not protected by law alone — it is preserved by people who freely choose to use their freedom for others, not just for themselves.

This week

This week, identify one relationship — at home, at work, or in your neighborhood — where you have been quietly defaulting to "I don't have to." Read Galatians 5:13-15 slowly, then make one concrete, unhurried choice to serve that person in a way that costs you something small but real — and bring it back to prayer.

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