

It may surprise us that the word “freedom” is not once found in the Declaration of Independence. Instead of “freedom,” the Declaration highlighted “liberty,” along with “life” and the “pursuit of happiness,” as our inalienable rights. Over the years, the word “liberty” has fallen out of the national vocabulary, and “freedom” has replaced it.

We commemorate those who died in war with the phrase, “Freedom isn’t free,” and we cherish the first amendment’s guarantee of “Freedom of speech.” But, despite talking a lot about freedom, we are not always sure what it means. Does “freedom of speech” guarantee my right to say hateful and incendiary things on Twitter?

The popular notion of freedom today is of an unrestrained, unconstrained liberty: “Don’t tread on me!” This has not always been the case. John Winthrop (1588-1644), first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, believed freedom was the liberty to do only what is good, just and honest. He condemned the notion of freedom as the liberty to do whatever we want.

This 4th of July, the freedom to blast off massive amounts of fireworks in one’s driveway is severely limited by most city governments, due to noise and the risk of fire. Even on this day when we celebrate our liberty, our freedom to light up the night sky and send dogs and children running into sound proof rooms, is balanced by our neighbors’ freedom to live in an explosion-free environment.

Our freedom is always in tension with the freedom of other’s. As the old saying goes, “My freedom ends where your nose begins.” The end of the road of doing whatever I want, whenever I want, wherever I want, is not freedom but nihilism and ultimately, chaos.

This notion of freedom assumes there is nothing greater than my will that might command me to do something I do not choose to do, no value higher than those I impose upon the world. It is a rejection, conscious or not, of all religious and moral principles in the belief that life is meaningless.

Understood this way, freedom is little more than a pretext for self-indulgence. This is what Paul refers to as the “flesh,” giving free rein to whatever desires arise (Gal 5:13). This notion of freedom is what Peter calls a cloak for maliciousness, or more pointedly, a cloak for evil (1 Peter 2:16).

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Paul sees human beings as engaged in a never ending conflict between the “flesh” and the Spirit, between desires that enslave us and desires whose end is our liberation.

Self-indulgence, Paul argues, is one sure way to lose our freedom, to become enslaved to worthless desires. Or, as the modern apostle of capitalism, Warren Buffett, put it, “Most behavior is habitual, and the chains of habit are too light to be felt until they are too heavy to be broken.”

The only law by which it is possible for the church truly to live is Christ’s commandment that his followers love one another; and this law of love is anarchic in its universal embrace. It is utterly incredible in view of the New Testament’s picture of reality for anyone to justly deny the dignity of another, to deny the image of God in another.

For the Christian, freedom is realized by obeying Christ’s command to love God with all one’s heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. We become free, not by doing anything and everything we want, but by doing the loving thing.

Desire always arises in response to some imagined good, some promise of happiness or fulfillment. Every desire serves some end. In everything we do, we are serving somebody or something, be it ourselves, the state, the market, the true, the good, the beautiful, or God.

Only a wisdom that allows us to distinguish worthy ends from worthless ones, or to recognize the relative value of diverse desires, can actually make us in any meaningful sense free.

We are free, as John Winthrop knew, as that great theologian of desire, St Augustine knew, as St Paul knew, not because we can choose, but only when we have chosen well. When we choose well, we know love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.