

## Liberty

Alumni Essay read by John Gillis at the Commencement Exercises  
May 29, 1928.

Liberty! Only a small word, but what power it contains. How many hearts have thrilled at the sound of that name, and how many lives have been given in its cause! Among all the gifts that we have received from God there is none which we value more, or for which we will sacrifice so much.

We who have always possessed such a high degree of liberty and have not had to fight for it as our forefathers did, are apt to overlook how important a part it plays in our happiness. If we would understand the real value of liberty we must go and examine those who are not blessed with this great gift. Go to a prison and watch the convicts there, those men who for some reason or other have forfeited their liberty. You see them moving listlessly about as if they considered life one hopeless unending task. Examine those sullen faces, on which were once stamped the happy smiles of childhood but which are now made hideous by the lines of despair, and you will have an idea of the consequences of the loss of liberty. From there go to where is assembled a group of slaves, those who have never known this greatest blessing that man is privileged to enjoy. It is a gloomy sight indeed to watch those fellow creatures of ours, possessing an immortal soul as precious in the sight of God as our own, treated as if they were mere brutes. Surely no liberty-loving person can look upon such a scene without repugnance. Look at those faces on which perhaps the smile of hope has never appeared, and you will be tempted to ask yourself whether man without his liberty is any better than the beast. Surely you cannot look on such a scene without being moved to a greater appreciation of that priceless boon—liberty. Finally go to a group of people who are appressed by a despot. It will not take you long to perceive the discontent of those whose liberties are unjustly encroached upon. You will have but to mention that word and the inert energy of those men immediately makes itself felt, and they will follow you to any extreme, yea, even to death, in an attempt to gain a greater measure of freedom.

We have seen therefore how important liberty is to man, but what is the meaning of the word? One would expect that a word so constantly used would require very little explanation, but this is not the case. True, it is a very common word, in fact one



of the commonest in our language, but it is equally true that there are a great many people continually using it who do not understand its real meaning.

What is liberty? Liberty is merely the faculty of choosing between different means, the end proposed. And since man can choose between different means to an end he is essentially free. Liberty, of course, is in a sense restricted by law, and this being so, only God is absolutely free. Our first parents in Eden enjoyed a high degree of liberty, however, since there was only one law imposed upon them, viz: They were not to eat of the forbidden fruit. But Satan tempted them, telling them that God could not restrict their liberty, and if they would but eat they would become like unto God. They accepted this advice, disobeyed their Creator, and, deprived of grace, gave up their soul to sin and its evil consequences. Chief among these are darkness of the understanding, weakness of the will, and a propensity to evil.

In their primitive state our first parents had their intelligence unclouded, and their lower faculties were perfectly subject to reason. But after the fall, with their darkened understanding they were not able to distinguish so clearly between good and evil, hence the necessity of a law to guide them and show them the way they must follow in order to gain their ultimate end. Secondly their passions were inclined to revolts against their superior faculties, hence the inclination to evil and the danger of man becoming a slave to his passions—the most abject form of slavery that exists.

In considering liberty the question naturally presents itself; when does man possess it in the highest degree? Briefly we may say that man possesses it in the highest degree when he acts in accordance with the laws of God, made known to him through a right conscience. This does not coincide with the general conception of liberty, but it is nevertheless true. A great many people of the present day think that man enjoys the plenitude of liberty when he satisfies his every wish. These false ideas of liberty are clearly seen in many of our present day evils such as divorce and intemperance. Their exponents seem to think that they have not liberty unless they can gratify their every desire; but just when they think they are enjoying the greatest measure of freedom, they are in reality the greatest of slaves, for they are ruled by the most cruel and despotic of all masters—their passions.

Man's individual liberty is restricted by law, whether divine or human. Let us first consider in what measure human law can justly restrict individual liberty.



If man were a solitary being, and his actions had no influence on his fellow man, other men would have no right to pass laws which would restrict individual liberty. However man is not a solitary, he is a social being—a member of society, and, as such, his actions have an influence on other members of that society; and if this influence is injurious, the lawfully constituted government has a right to pass laws to prevent such acts. On the other hand legislators have no authority to restrict individual liberty in any form whatsoever when such is not necessary for the protection of society. Any law that is thus passed is an unjust law, or rather a species of violence, and there is nothing that men resent so much as a law which unjustly takes away their liberty. We have but to read our history to get proof of this. The Roman people thought that Caesar was about to restrict their liberty and, although they knew that he was the greatest statesman of the time and had brought great glory to the Empire, yet they did not hesitate when they thought their liberty was at stake; the price, however great, had to be paid, and Caesar was assassinated. The people of England, after centuries of struggle for a greater measure of freedom, finally succeeded in forcing King John to sign the Magna Charta, the foundation of the British constitution as it is today. And having once tasted freedom they have guarded it jealously ever since in the face of the greatest obstacles. Charles the First tried to deprive them of some of that liberty, but the British people, although they have always had a great respect for the persons of their sovereign, saw that there was no other means by which they could safeguard their liberty, and Charles paid the price of tyranny on the block, thus the people of Great Britain have safeguarded their liberty against every tyrant down through the ages, with the result, that today British liberty seems to be the ideal sought for by the peoples of all other nations.

England is not the only country in which this struggle for freedom has existed, for history attests to the fact that, in nearly every country there have been struggles between the people and despotic rulers who tried to limit their subjects' liberty. This action on the part of the people is indeed praiseworthy, for it shows that they value that great gift which God has so generously bestowed upon them. But, while we should do all in our power to protect our liberty against tyrants, we should on the other hand guard against those who use that word to further their own selfish end, as well as against those who under the guise of liberty are advocating nothing more than license. These men know that there is nothing that will arouse a man to act on more quickly than to tell him that his liberty is unjustly limited, and so they oftentimes use



this knowledge to gain power themselves, and when they get control, rule not for the good of the people but for their own interests. We have many examples of this in history. Let us turn again to the time of Caesar. Brutus and Cassius persuaded the Roman citizens that Caesar was going to restrict their liberty; and what was their motive? Was it to safeguard the liberty of the Romans? By no means, rather was it because they wished to gain control of the government and thus further their own selfish interests. The same thing happened when Charles the First was executed. Cromwell was the man who advocated his death. But what did Cromwell do when he took control of the government? One would naturally suppose that he would remove the abuses that existed during the reign of Charles, but we find that instead of giving the people a greater measure of liberty, he took away nearly all that they had already possessed. And history shows him to have been one of the greatest tyrants that have ever ruled the English people.

Nor are we obliged to study ancient history to find examples of people who have been led astray by false conceptions of liberty, for we have an excellent example of this in our own time. A few years ago, the people of Russia, groaning under the burdens imposed upon them by the Czar and the upper classes, decided to overthrow the existing government and set up in its place one in which the people would have complete control. The catchwords, Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality, so often abused, were used to catch the unwary, with the result that Lenin and Trotsky replaced the Royal family. These men instituted in Russia a form of government known as Bolshevism, in which the people were supposed to enjoy absolute freedom, but which is in reality the most barbaric and despotic form of government of modern times. They pretend to give the people religious liberty, but they forbid the teaching of religion to the children before they reach a certain age. They overlook the fact that the most law-abiding citizens are the most religious, for the very fact that they keep the laws of God prevents them from breaking the just laws of their country; and how are those people to know their religion if they are not taught it in their youth, when impressions are most easily made on their minds? We may well pause to question what chance these children have of becoming virtuous men and women when they are surrounded by such an atheistic atmosphere, and what will become of a country which is rearing such a generation of citizens.

We have considered some of the many phases of liberty. We have seen what true liberty is; what a blessing it is to mankind, and how much man will do to safeguard it. We have also considered



some false conceptions of liberty and the disastrous effects that result from them. And when we, as Canadians, behold the havoc wrought in other lands as a result of these false ideas, we must surely be moved to a greater love for our country, a country in which essential liberty is guaranteed to all.

"And I have thought of other lands, whose storms  
Are summer flaws to mine, and just  
Have wished me there—the thought that mine was free  
Has checked that wish; and I have raised my head  
And cried in thralldom, to that furious wind,  
'Blow on!—This is the land of liberty'."

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### Evening.

No sign of clouds; the sun has gone to rest  
In its great tent, 'neath the horizon line.  
The western sky, now gold and amethyst,  
Adorns the hills of sand, and woods of pine.  
The placid waters, stretching out before,  
A mirror bright, reflect their rocky banks,  
Which look so many castles. On the shore,  
The hungry plover charge in perplexed ranks.  
The gossip cricket in the meadow near,  
Chirps by himself his notes so crude and plain;  
From yonder pool, the chanting frogs sing clear  
To all the listening world, a sweet refrain.  
Appearance, one by one, of stars on high,  
Reveals that day is done, and night is night.

—W. L. '29.