

Rights & Responsibilities  
Galatians 6:1-10; Luke 10:1-11

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Tomorrow is our national holiday. This year, especially given the events of the last few weeks, it seems like a good time to think about patriotism: patriotism, rights, and responsibilities.

We all have responsibilities. Some responsibilities are mandatory. We may not want to do them but we have to. Paying our taxes. Responding to a jury summons. Obeying the law. These are responsibilities we all have. They are not negotiable.

But some responsibilities are not mandatory, they're just things we do if we're responsible people. If we're a responsible person, we get a physical every year. We leave a will. If we're in a position of authority like a teacher or coach or manager, we set a good example. These are things responsible people do.

Being responsible, though, doesn't have to be a chore. Being responsible can be very rewarding. When I make out my will, I feel good that I've taken steps to dispose of my assets carefully and care for the people I love. Getting an annual physical isn't exactly fun, but it's good to know I'm caring for the body God gave me. Obeying the law is a way of making this country I love a safer, better place.

Christianity is all about responsibility. Jesus seldom talks about our 'rights' as disciples. Paul never mentions the 'Ten Freedoms' or the 'Christian Bill of Rights'.

Jesus appoints 72 followers to go out ahead of him. He doesn't ask them what they want to do. He appoints them. He doesn't ask them what they would like to do. He tells them. "Go, carry nothing, say this, stay in one place, eat what is set before you." He gives them responsibilities.

Paul is much the same. He doesn't ask the Galatians what they would like to do. He tells them. Restore the transgressor. Bear one another's burdens. Work for the good of all. He gives them responsibilities.

Wow. That's heavy. Who would want to be a Christian with all that responsibility? But those of us who love God and follow Jesus know it's not like that. We know living up to our Christian responsibilities is very rewarding. We grow in faith. We live more Godly lives. We bring hope and healing to our community. Being a Christian means being a responsible Christian. And those who know, know that is a joyful, marvelous thing. Being a responsible Christian is not a chore. Being a responsible Christian is a joy.

Being responsible is important. Fulfilling our responsibilities matters. Being responsible makes our lives better and everyone else's better. But these days, I don't hear much talk about being responsible Americans. When I watch the news, when I read the papers, when I talk to people in casual conversation, what I hear a lot about is our rights. I hear a lot about our American freedoms.

Rights are a good thing. For sure. They are enshrined in our Constitution: The Bill of Rights. These are important. They matter.

But I have to say, in the last few years, our rights have become more than just rights or freedoms. They have become a fetish. Almost an addiction.

I was in Wal-Mart a few months ago and a t-shirt. It was a woman's shirt with a picture of our flag and these words, "I'm sorry, I can't hear you over the sound of my freedom." It's as if our freedoms, our rights, are making us deaf to everything and everyone around us.

Are our freedoms making us deaf to Jesus? Are our rights as Americans making so much noise, we can't hear Jesus reminding us of our Christian responsibilities?

As Christians, which is more important? As Christians, if push comes to shove, which matters more: our rights as Citizens or our responsibilities as Christians? Our rights as Citizens or our responsibilities as Christians?

Personally, I believe if you were born an American citizen, you won the lottery. Being born an American is the nationality jackpot. I wouldn't want to be anything else. Honest to goodness.

But as a Christian, especially as a Presbyterian, I know God is more important than country. God always takes precedence. The Christian flag always ranks higher than any nation's flag.

As Presbyterians we call this the Sovereignty of God. God is sovereign over every other force or being or power in the universe. God is the supreme ruler. And this is not something we made-up last week. This is what we've been saying for as long as there have been Presbyterians.

As Christians generally, and as Presbyterians specifically, we believe God always comes before country. God always comes before country.

So, what does that mean for us? How do we live as both Americans and Christians? How do we love both our God and our Country?

First of all, remember when we concentrate on our Christian responsibilities – when we share God's good news, when we bring the transgressor around, when we bear one another's burdens – when we concentrate on our Christian responsibilities, we become better people. We become better people.

And when we become better people, it rubs off on others. Yes, it does. When we become better people, it helps others become better people. And when several of us become better people, the community becomes better. Pretty soon, it's snowballing.

The more we as Christians see to our Christian responsibilities, the better we become. And the better we become, the more it spreads – ripples on a pond.

Second, if we genuinely love our country, if we are truly proud to be Americans, if we honestly want America to be a genuinely Christian nation, then the best thing we can do is spend less time talking about our rights as Americans and more time acting on our responsibilities as Christians.

Our rights are important. Absolutely. But America will be a more Christian nation if we spend less time worrying about our rights as Citizens and more time acting on our responsibilities as Christians.

When we take care of our Christian responsibilities then the Good News spreads, we live in peace with each other, we grow in faith, and America becomes more the nation God wants us to be.

Tomorrow is our national holiday. It is a time to celebrate our rights, our freedoms. Do we love our country? Do we want to be patriotic? Do we want to be the best American we can be? Then let us be the best, most responsible Christians we can be.

May God bless us all. And by so doing, may God bless America. Amen.