

Principles of Liberty

SESSION THREE

WHAT DO THE FOUR FREEDOMS TEACH US ABOUT THE NATURE OF RIGHTS?

The first two freedoms on President Roosevelt's list of "Four Essential Human Freedoms," **freedom of speech and expression** and **freedom of worship**, are rights guaranteed in the US Constitution. To secure them, government is primarily required *to stay out of the way* and to allow people to speak freely and practice to their religious faith as they see fit. Whenever people hinder or prevent their fellow citizens from exercising their rights of speech and worship, government's role is to penalize them for violating others' rights. With regard to the first two freedoms, therefore, government action, generally speaking, is clearly defined, limited, and attainable.

Upon reflection, it isn't difficult to see that the third freedom—**freedom from want**—is fundamentally different from the first two. The difference is qualitative; it is not a difference of degree, but of kind.

While the goal of reducing want was and is laudable, Roosevelt was saying people had a *right* to be free from want! This assumption gives government a task God never intended it to have.¹ How are people's needs to be met? According to Scripture, individuals are to work to provide for themselves and their families. Moreover, it isn't just work that is to be satisfying, but also the wealth produced by that work.² This is not selfishness or greed, but a contentment resulting from efforts expended. In addition, with wealth so gained, workers are in a position to be generous. They can help those who have legitimate needs. Generosity, you see, also is satisfying and rewarding.

We readily can admit that not everyone can work; but everyone who can, should. You can take it to the bank: When government becomes engaged in working directly to eliminate want, it almost invariably does so through taxation and redistribution of wealth. This kills people's incentive to work and produce wealth!

The fourth right is much like the third. To secure **freedom from fear**, government must actively intervene in the lives and the affairs of its people. Do not misunderstand. Nations clearly have a duty to shore up defenses and to use them to keep their people safe from aggressors inside and outside their borders. In this sense, governments are legitimately engaged in minimizing fear.

Beware, however! Treating this as a right means obligating government in ways that empower it to interfere in people's lives! Roosevelt spoke at a time when war was on the horizon, but many fears are not related to war. Just how far will government go to meet its citizens' "right" to live fear-free lives? In business, no one can succeed without taking risks, something that is inherently frightening. So, if a government eliminates fear, it eradicates success as well! This is bad enough, but keep in mind we're talking about more than business. The effort to wipe out fear, especially among a national population, inevitably will become a quest without end.

Thus, the first two of the Four Freedoms are qualitatively different from the second two. Social and political scientists call the first two freedoms or "rights" on FDR's list *negative rights*, and the second two *positive rights*.

¹See item 4 at this address: <https://bit.ly/2A9bn4r>

²Genesis 2:15; Exodus 20:8-9; Proverbs 6:6-11; Proverbs 12:14; Proverbs 14:23; Ecclesiastes 3:13; Ecclesiastes 5:12; Romans 12:11; Ephesians 4:28; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12; 1 Timothy 5:3-8 — <https://bit.ly/3d9ik43>