

# Freedom of Speech

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Preaching on:

James 1:19–20

Romans 14:1–3

Most of us here, as Americans, have this deep inner sense that the freedom of speech is both a sacred right and a necessary evil. And whichever way you happen to be thinking of it at any given time has a lot to do with whether or not you're in agreement with the last opinion you just heard. I'm feeling compelled to talk about freedom of speech this morning for just this reason. Because we all know we would never want to live in one of the many places where people aren't free to speak up, speak out, speak the truth. And none of us—no person—is a true free-speech absolutist. We all feel like the line must be drawn somewhere, and we struggle with where, when, and how to draw that line.

This is all especially relevant to us right now because we just experienced a historic, controversial, and divisive antiwar, pro-Palestinian campus protest movement that's left many of us with big questions about freedom of speech and expression, about the tactics and rhetoric of protesters and counter

protesters, and about the response of the educational institutions and the police. And many of us are wondering: Where do we go from here?

So, I think I need to try to cover, briefly, three things this morning. I'm going to talk about the actual content of what the protesters have been saying. I'm going to talk about why I think freedom of speech is so important. And I'm going to talk about what our response should be to expression or opinion like the recent protests.

One of the biggest reasons that the campus protests have been so controversial and divisive is because they've been accused of being antisemitic. And there are a lot of competing opinions about whether or not that's true. For example, there are pro-Palestinian Jewish protesters who say that they haven't experienced any antisemitism at all in the encampments and protests. And there are Jewish students, students who believe that Israel's war in Gaza is unjust and should be stopped, who have reported being targeted on campus because of their Jewish identity. We've seen reports of things like Nazi flags being flown at the protests. And we've heard from protest organizers that these things are isolated incidents from fringe individuals. We've heard chants like "Globalize the Intifada" which many Jews hear as a call for globalized violence against Jews, but which protesters claim is a non-violent call to action. We've heard "From the River to the Sea" which many Jews hear as a call for the total genocide and displacement of Jews in Israel, but which protesters claim is just a call for Palestinian freedom in the place they live. We've heard from protesters that Zionists are people who believe that Palestinians should never have a state of their own. We've heard from many Jews that Zionists are people who believe the Jews should always have a state of their own. Zionists have been particularly targeted by the protesters in terms of speech and action ("Zionists" have been harassed on campus and blocked from moving through campus, for example). Many Jews claim this is just a way to target Jews. Some protesters claim that they're not targeting Jews, that they're targeting Israel, its rightwing government, and its policies. Some Jews have claimed that any criticism of Israel, especially in this moment, is antisemitic.

I admire the protester's calls to action for the Palestinian cause. I abhor war and violence. I hate the devastating toll this war has had on innocent people. There should be a ceasefire in Gaza now. And there needs to be a better, self-determining future for the Palestinians, ideally with their own state. That won't be easy, especially with a group as absolutely detestable and dangerous as Hamas in charge of Gaza. But we need to figure this out or it's only going to get worse for everybody. Israel cannot wipe out Hamas. I wish they could, but it's just impossible without wiping out all of Gaza, and we can't let that happen. I think the people in charge in Israel are smart enough to know they can't wipe out Hamas, and they're probably actually being motivated by other factors—from politics to revenge and even hatred. And it has to stop. So, to that point, I'm in accord with the protesters.

But what I—especially as a Christian, who recognizes the shameful part the Christian Church has had to play in the framing and perpetuation of antisemitism, and the key role the Church has had in establishing genocidal violence and persecution against Jews—what I cannot stand by or give a pass

to under any circumstances is antisemitism.

Have the campus protests been antisemitic? Well, anecdotally there's a lot of evidence that they have been. It's really hard, in my opinion, to fly a swastika and then claim you don't have a problem. But were these just isolated incidents? Or were the protests themselves systemically founded upon principles or narratives that are inherently antisemitic? That's a harder question to answer. Where I'm at right now is that I am absolutely sure that the protests and the protesters, by and large, were not trying to be careful about antisemitism. It is not a priority for them.

For me to be truly comfortable with any movement in criticism of Israel or Jews, I would need to make sure that a commitment to anti-antisemitism is a foundational principle. The left has told us that passively not being racist is not enough. We need to be actively antiracist. For me, an outspoken commitment to anti-antisemitism has been sorely lacking in the protests and, I believe, it's what is morally and strategically required by the campus protest movement as it moves forward.

Now should protests which are not anti-antisemitic and which sometimes cross the line in indisputable antisemitism be allowed to continue? Should these protesters be allowed to speak and express themselves freely. I believe, absolutely, yes. There are a lot of reasons to support the general principle of freedom of speech even when you will almost certainly disagree with some of that speech and even when some of it will be problematic and some of it will be vile. I don't have time to get into them all. So, I'll talk about one that I think is especially relevant to the recent campus protests.

In the West, especially in the United States, the freedom of speech has become a critical cultural rite of passage for young people (especially) in the process of discovery of who we are, of what we believe, and of what we're capable of. Every person deserves to be a part of the conversation and deserves to express their deepest ideals to the rest of us. Absolutely no one should be silenced by the government or punished by the government for speech. As for the rest of us, we should do our best, as much as possible, to cultivate a tolerance for diverse opinions.

Many of the campus protesters have been described as naïve or as unaware of the history in Israel and Palestine. I'm sure that's true of some of them, perhaps it's even descriptive of the movement as a whole. But that's a terrible justification for silencing someone. In fact, it's all the more reason to engage them as productively as possible. It's not always possible to engage people productively when they've barricaded themselves in your administration building, but it should be one of our guiding principles, certainly a long-term guiding principle. Like, we have no choice but to arrest you today, but that doesn't mean we're not going to talk to you tomorrow. We should honor the voices of these young people, even when they're wrong. We should listen to them, even when it's hard for us to do so. We should call them out, when they need to be called out. But we should engage them, rather than simply trying to make them go away.

Now, I'm talking now about speech—about the expression of ideas and opinions. But these have been

protests—protests which (by design) have been extremely disruptive, sometimes destructive, sometimes a threat to safety and perhaps to necessary moral stands against antisemitism. Allowing someone the freedom to speak and to express themselves is not the same as allowing them to burn down the library, right? We all have a line. And every institution had to calculate that line for themselves. Some did better than others. It was extraordinarily difficult and stressful, and some of you were a part of those decisions. As a longtime leftie agitator, I can tell you absolutely that these protests are designed to get you to call the police on them. That's part of the process here. It's part of the dance. But when and how the police are called, and what they do when they arrive, is critically important. We cannot let ourselves get to a place where every time we see a bunch of young people getting rowdy and expressing themselves, we just automatically call the police and have them cleared out. That would be a huge mistake.

I saw very peaceful, relatively contained encampments cleared out violently by police under the watchful eyes of sniper rifles. I'm totally against calling the police out to attack peaceful, contained protests. If the response to your speech is a boot and a gun, you're not likely to change your mind or to grow because you're not likely to be able to give the opposing viewpoint, which is hidden behind force, any serious consideration. It is a huge tactical mistake, and it doesn't honor the process that these young people are engaged in. We should have some tolerance for disruption in order to allow people the ability to fully express themselves and the ability to fully hear opposing opinions. And that peaceful, contained disruption should be intellectually and morally engaged with and negotiated with. That is, I believe, a process, a ritual, a rite-of-passage in our culture that should be held sacred.

As Christians, especially as Protestant Christians, this right to freedom of speech and expression is central to our identity. The word protest is right there in the name—Pro-test-ant. We should extend this grace to others as much as possible. We should be, as James advised us in our reading this morning, quick to listen and slow to anger. And when speech is so vile as to be irredeemable, we should do everything we can to meet hate speech with loving speech, to meet bad ideas with good ideas. As Paul suggests in his letter to the Romans this morning, freedom of speech is not primarily a way of having arguments with the people you disagree with. It's not about division. It's about, as much as possible, offering people who are different from you, and perhaps even wrong, the grace and the space to still have a place at the table. And, I believe, a place at the table, and the right to express oneself, is the process by which we will grow toward greater love and greater justice.