

Freedom

Preparation:

- Have ready a large sheet of paper, a marker pen, and a copy of the Bible.

Getting started

10 minutes

Invite the group to offer their thoughts on what it means to be free.

In philosophy, a distinction is sometimes made between two different kinds of freedom – *positive freedom*, or ‘freedom to’ independently pursue a particular goal, and *negative freedom*, or ‘freedom from’ constraints imposed by others.

Think about the ideas you have come up with. Are these positive or negative types of freedom?

Neoliberal economics

15 minutes

Explain to the group that as we explored in Session 3, the dominant economic model in the UK and most Western countries for the last 40 years has been a form of free market capitalism. Economic freedom is a central concept for proponents of this approach, sometimes labelled neoliberalism. The idea is that government intervention in the economy should be minimised, so that markets can operate freed from constraints as far as possible, to enable the greatest economic growth. Following this approach, since the 1980s many governments have deregulated economic activity and privatised previously publicly owned utilities and services.

➤ Is this a form of positive or negative freedom?

Think of some examples of constraints that governments might put on the economy or on economic activity. Capture suggestions on a large sheet of paper.

Some examples could include: labour rights, price controls, environmental protection regulations, putting in place minimum service requirements, imposing tariffs on goods imported from other countries, nationalisation of particular companies or services, consumer protection rules, regulation of financial services, raising taxes on particular activities or industries.

➤ Whose interests – and whose freedom – do each of these serve?

➤ What are likely to be the consequences of removing such constraints or regulations? Whose freedom is impacted?

In 2014, a statement from the World Council of Churches expressed concern that “The liberalisation and deregulation of markets over the last three decades as part of the sweeping processes of neoliberal

globalisation have allowed the build-up of a system which promotes insatiable consumption of human and natural resources and thus ever-growing economic, social and ecological imbalances.”¹

➤ Do you have ideas about how such imbalances could be averted?

Sabbath and Jubilee

30 minutes

In the book of Leviticus, chapter 25, we find one of the most detailed set of instructions for the operation of an economy to be found in the Bible. While there are historical debates about whether these rules were ever fully enacted, the principles upon which they are founded offer insights into how freedoms, rights and responsibilities should be balanced in an economic system.

Ask group members in turn to read out the following passages of scripture:

Leviticus 25:1-4

Leviticus 25:8-13

Leviticus 25:15-16

Leviticus 25:23

Leviticus 25:35-42

Then discuss the following questions:

- Do these passages specify what kind of economy God wanted Israel to have?
- What restrictions are placed on the economy?
- What relationship does it suggest the people have with the land?
- What relationship does it set out between God and his people?

While these passages do not dictate how the economy was to develop, they set out some restrictions which reflect the fundamental relationships between God, the land and the people:

- the land is God’s – note the Sabbath is for the land – so people can only be tenants of it. While the right to use it can be bought and sold, in the year of jubilee it returns to its original holder
- God freed his people from slavery, and entered into a covenant in which the people are bound to serve God, so people cannot become slaves to others for ever
- people have responsibilities to each other, so should not make profits from charging interest or selling food, and must support those who fall into hardship.

As one Jewish commentator describes it, “Leviticus 25 intervenes in the free market by establishing “unalienable rights” exempted from the rules of a market, and designed in theory so that no Israelite can become a member of a permanent economic underclass.”²

¹ World Council of Churches (2014), [‘The Economy of Life: An invitation to theological reflection and action’](#)

² Noam Zion, ‘Balancing Social Responsibility with Market Economics’, [TheTorah.com](#)

In the Sabbath and Jubilee years, any injustices that had built up in society were reset. Debts were to be written off, slaves freed, and land returned to its original holders. Discuss:

- What kind of freedom do the Sabbath and Jubilee year laws bring?
- How might our economy look if relationships were put at its heart?

Closing reflection: Jesus and Jubilee

4 minutes

At the outset of Jesus's ministry he makes reference to the concept of Jubilee, proclaiming 'the year of the Lord's favour', and speaks of the promise of good news for the poor, the release of captives, and the oppressed being set free.

Slowly read Luke 4:16-19, and use it as the focus for a brief time of reflection and free prayer to conclude the session.

Homework

1 minute

Before the next session, ask group members to think back over the five sessions of the course, and consider what has struck them most.