

## “For the Sake of the Gospel”

### The Fifteenth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

*Texts: 1 Corinthians 9:1-27; Leviticus 6:8-18*

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Although we are 2000 years removed from the ancient Greek city of Corinth, we accept Paul’s apostolic authority without question. For many of us, Paul is our favorite New Testament writer because he teaches so many of the doctrines we hold dear. It is hard for us to imagine that Paul had to defend his own apostolic authority in a church which he himself helped to found. Yet that is the case in 1 Corinthians 9. Paul cannot tell the strong among the Corinthians to act in a certain way toward the weak, if he himself does not practice what he preaches.<sup>1</sup> And so Paul now spells out his approach to dealing with Jewish and Gentile believers in the midst of a pagan culture.

In chapter 9 of 1 Corinthians, Paul continues to address problems arising from the practice of meat being sacrificed to idols. Apparently, some in the Corinthian church were using Paul’s voluntary surrender of his liberty to eat all things as an argument that Paul’s apostolic authority was limited. Even though Paul was free to eat all things, he realized that doing so might offend the weak, so in such cases, Paul abstained. As we saw last time in chapter 8, Paul explained that Christian liberty is not freedom to do whatever we want, but liberation to do as we ought.<sup>2</sup> Love for our brethren trumps Christian freedom.

Paul develops two basic lines of defense regarding his apostolic authority. These are stated in the form of a series of rhetorical questions.<sup>3</sup> The first is that Paul is indeed an apostle with all the rights and privileges thereof. A second point is that no Christian should use their liberty without due regard for the weak—just as Paul has done. This is especially problematic given the fact that Paul apparently ate Gentile food when in Gentile settings, even as he abstained in Jewish settings. It may have appeared to some that Paul is vacillating.<sup>4</sup> So Paul defends his behavior. He has done nothing wrong, or inconsistent with his apostolic calling. This is evident by the fact that he preaches the gospel voluntarily, even though he is entitled to be paid for his labor in the churches.

Throughout 1 Corinthians 9, Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions, designed to prove the validity of the two main points just mentioned.

In verse 1 of chapter 9, Paul asks, “*Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?*” As to the first question, Paul is free from the law (i.e., the Mosaic economy) because the law of Moses belongs to this present evil age and has passed away with the coming of Christ. He is also free from the condemnation of the law because Christ has borne our condemnation. If any Christian can rightfully claim such freedom, it is Paul (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:19 ff.). In Galatians 2:11 ff. and 5:1, Paul argued that such freedom is a fruit of the gospel. Whenever this freedom is challenged by false teachers, Paul is the first person willing to defend it, since such freedom is

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Hans Conzelman, *1 Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 151.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 128.

<sup>3</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 392.

<sup>4</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 393.

a corollary to the gospel. But when it comes to the weak within the church, Paul voluntarily gives up his freedom to keep the weak from stumbling.

As to the second and third questions, Paul is an apostle, only because Jesus himself appeared to him while he was on his way to Damascus to hunt down and persecute Christians (Acts 9:1-31). The office of apostle is not something Paul had sought because of any kind of personal ambition. Paul's office as apostle has its basis and its authority in Christ's call since Paul is now able to bear witness to Christ's resurrection. Paul has seen the risen Christ. Paul's apostolic authority comes from none other than Jesus himself, and it was Jesus who called Paul to his apostolic office. Finally, it was through Paul's effort in preaching the gospel that the Corinthian church was born—i.e. the result of Paul's work in the Lord. Paul “planted or founded the church in Corinth; he was its father in the sense that he was the instrument used by God.”<sup>5</sup> The very existence of this congregation is the proof. This is a point Paul made in 1 Corinthians 3:6: *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.*

As Paul points out in verse 2, “*If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.*” While others may have called Paul's apostolic credentials into question, the Corinthians ought to be the last to do so. They knew Paul. He had been in their midst. The existence of this congregation constituted empirical verification of Paul's apostolic credentials. If they deny the validity of Paul's call, they are, in effect, denying their own validity as a congregation.<sup>6</sup> The word translated as seal, indicates a mark of authority or ownership. Paul is Christ's seal upon this church. The Corinthians should know who Paul is and what authority he possesses.<sup>7</sup>

What follows in verse 3 gets at the heart of Paul's ministry as Apostle to the Gentiles. “*This is my defense to those who would examine me.*” Paul offers an *apologia* (a legal defense) against those who sit in judgment (also a legal term) upon his ministry. “*Do we not have the right to eat and drink?*” In 1 Corinthians 8:9, Paul had spoken of the rights (*exousia*) of the Corinthians to eat certain foods (“*But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak*”). At the very least, Paul is reminding the congregation that he has full rights to eat and drink all things, since all things have been created by God and can be sanctified through prayer.

The context indicates that the food and drink to which Paul is referring is that of having his personal needs met by the church in exchange for his service.<sup>8</sup> That Paul is speaking of personal sustenance (and not Christian liberty) is further supported by the fact that Paul uses the plural (“we”) indicating that this is true of all those who serve the church. Furthermore, the following verse make this point plain. “*Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?*” While Paul assumes the right for apostles to be married (a bit of a problem for Rome and the notion of clerical celibacy), he argues that apostles have the right to travel with their wives at the church's expense, while they conducted their apostolic ministries. Paul mentions Peter by name, indicating that Peter traveled with his wife to the area with the implication being that it was common

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<sup>5</sup> Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 201.

<sup>6</sup> Conzelman, *1 Corinthians*, 152.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 130.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 131.

knowledge that the churches provided for them while conducting church business. Paul also mentions that other apostles and the Lord's brothers were married, the later is almost certainly a reference to Jesus' brothers and means that Mary and Joseph had children together after our Lord was born.

In verse 6, the apostle asks, "*Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?*" Paul and Barnabas, apparently, were two apostles who supported themselves by working, rather than rely upon support from the churches (hence, the phrase "tent-making" ministries). Paul asks, "*Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?*" These rhetorical questions illustrate the point that Soldiers, vinedressers and shepherds receive the fruit of their labors for their personal sustenance. The implication is obvious—the same thing should be true for the apostles, who should have their needs met by those whom they serve.

In verses 8-9, Paul bolsters this point by appealing to Deuteronomy 25:4. "*Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.' Is it for oxen that God is concerned?*" The way the question is phrased indicates that Paul expects the reader to answer in the negative. The law of Moses speaks directly to this subject. When an animal like an ox smashed the heads of grain, the wind blew away the chaff while the grain remained behind. If the ox was not muzzled, the ox was to be able to sustain itself in its heavy labor by eating some of the grain that it had crushed. But muzzle the ox and it dies.

When Paul asks the question, "is God really concerned about the ox," the point is that "yes, God is concerned about the ox," which is why this was included in the law. And yet, the principle here goes beyond the needs of an ox. If an ox is entitled to eat, then surely the man who labors is entitled to the fruit of his labors. In this case, the apostles who labor to preach, teach and plant churches, are worthy of their labors as well. That this is plain is clear from the next verse. "*Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop.*" This time, Paul's rhetorical question is to be answered in the affirmative.

The illustration of an ox being able to eat from the grain it crushes supports the greater principle that those who labor are entitled to the fruit of their labor. As the plowman and the thresher eat what their fields produce, the same thing should be true for those who labor in terms of the gospel, a point Paul which now make quite specifically in verse 11. "*If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?*" The question is phrased to indicate that the condition has already been fulfilled. If we have sown spiritual seed—and obviously, Paul and the others have done so—then like the plowman and thresher, those who labor in the gospel should reap a material harvest (i.e., their needs should be met).

Paul makes this point in verse 12. "*If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.*" From Paul's comments, it is clear that others who have labored among the Corinthians had been supported by the church (Peter and Apollos have already been specifically mentioned). But Paul did not take any support, therefore some had concluded that he was not entitled to support and that his apostolic authority was somehow less than that of the others. But if others were supported by the congregation, and since Paul was the father (founder) of this congregation, shouldn't Paul be every bit as entitled as the others? Paul did nothing to hinder the spread of the gospel. His sacrifice was voluntary and not in any sense an indication that his authority was less than the others.

The rhetorical question in verse 13 and the comment in verse 14 indicates that Paul's hearers should have known the answer to his question. *"Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel."* As we saw in our Old Testament lesson (from Leviticus 6) those who worked in the temple earned their livelihood by doing so, as do those who maintained the altar. Furthermore the Lord himself has commanded that those who preach should likewise earn their living through preaching.

But Paul did not exercise his rights, as he will now spell out in verses 15-18, when he acknowledges that he voluntarily gave up these rights. In verse 15, we read, *"But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting."* While Paul is entitled to support, he has not taken any while preaching. Paul is not writing so as to ask for support and is so adamant about this that he states that he'd rather die than take support at this point.

The apostle is obviously speaking rhetorically in this regard, but nevertheless, he is quite emotional about this point. *"For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"* But while Paul can boast about not taking support to which he is entitled, there is only woe for Paul if he does not preach the gospel. Preaching is Paul's calling. There is no reason for him to boast. This is what he lives to do and he will not allow anything to get in the way of this task to which Jesus himself has called him.

Says Paul in verse 17, *"For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship."* This is a difficult verse both to translate and to interpret.<sup>9</sup> Paul probably means that even though he preaches the gospel freely and without pay, nevertheless he is entitled to a reward (wage). But since Paul has been called by Christ (and is therefore a slave of Christ) he has no choice but to do as he has done—he is fulfilling that obligation which Jesus Christ has laid upon him. Paul is responsible to God and can do nothing else but preach Christ crucified. He asks, *"what then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel."* But Paul has to preach—he can do nothing else. In a sense he is saying it is his proper pay to preach without being paid. While the gospel gives him certain rights (pay included), it is his personal privilege not to exercise these rights.

If there is any one place in Paul's letters where he gives us a glimpse into his philosophy of ministry, it is here. Paul sees his role as placing himself in the position of his hearers, so as to most effectively preach the gospel to them. This become clear in the following verses, especially v. 19. *"For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them."* This is a very dramatic declaration that while Paul is free, he also regards himself as a slave. His reason for this is simple—to win as many people to Christ as possible. To "win people" is a Jewish notion, and reflects doing what is necessary to make it easy for people to convert, as Rabbis were frequently willing to do with proselytes.<sup>10</sup>

Paul's reference to freedom might be the same as in 1 Corinthians 9:1, a theological reference to the law

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<sup>9</sup> See the discussion in Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 210.

<sup>10</sup> Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 211.

and its condemnation as part of the Mosaic economy.<sup>11</sup> It might also be a reference to Paul's Roman citizenship, since Paul was a freeman.<sup>12</sup> The point is that Paul regards himself as a slave to everyone, including the Corinthians.

Paul spells out how he understands his ministry in verse 20: *“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To start with, when it comes to Jewish credentials, Paul's are impeccable. As he writes in Philippians 3:4-6, “though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”* Paul has the pedigree.

Although Paul is in union with Christ—who according to Paul in Romans 10:4 is the end of the law for everyone who believes—when approaching Jews to preach Christ to them, Paul lived like one under the law, to win those under the law. Paul was very careful about what he ate and respected Jew traditions and customs (kosher) so as not to put obstacles in the way of his Jewish hearers considering the claims of Christ who fulfilled everything to which the Law of Moses pointed. This explains why Paul ordered that Timothy be circumcised in Acts 16:1-3 and why when in Jerusalem, Paul participated in Jewish purification rites (Acts 21:23-26). Paul shows great respect for Jewish customs, so as to remove objections of antinomianism and to establish common ground with his people. As one writer puts it, Paul “asked Jews not so much to give up the practice of the law as their confidence in it. Their trust must be in Christ.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, even though Paul is free from the law, he is perfectly willing to live as a Jew (as if under the law) to lead a Jew to Christ.

But when he is with Gentiles, Paul is willing to live as a Gentile. *“To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.”* As he did with the Jews, Paul also met the Gentiles on their own ground. A good illustration of this can be seen in his various sermons to Gentiles (cf. Acts 17:22 ff.). When Paul says he becomes as one not under the law, he does not mean that he is willing to behave lawlessly if and when the Gentiles do, since he is still under the law of Christ (i.e. the moral law). Paul does mean that in the presence of Gentiles, he does not live as a Jew (as one under the Mosaic economy) and probably ate Gentile food and so on. Paul's comments are not a treatise on the relationship between the law and the gospel, but simply a follow-up to his previous comments.<sup>14</sup> When Paul is with the Jews, he lives as a Jew. When Paul is with the Gentiles, he lives as a Gentile. He does so to avoid putting any obstacles in the way of the preaching of the gospel to either. Food should not be an obstacle to evangelism.

Paul now sets forth what amounts to his philosophy of ministry. *“To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.”* When Paul makes reference to

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<sup>11</sup> Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 210.

<sup>12</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 135

<sup>13</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 136.

<sup>14</sup> Contra Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 214 ff.

living like a Jew or a Gentile, he does so for the express purpose of preaching the gospel to them, eliminating obstacles to faith. The weak are people who are already Christians.<sup>15</sup> Paul has already made plain his concern for these Christians whose consciences are burdened by things for which Christ has died and with which they should not be struggling.

When among the weak, Paul behaves as one who is weak, so as to win the weak and bring them to a position wherein they may become strong.<sup>16</sup> As new Christians (or still weak), Paul hopes to win them so their weak consciences would not overcome them causing them to leave the church. Paul respects such people's scruples about meat sacrificed to idols and does nothing to offend them. But his goal, certainly, is not to leave them in this weak position, but to strengthen them. The strong bear with the weak, with the goal of helping them move on to maturity.

When Paul speaks of becoming all things to all men for the sake of the gospel, we must not take Paul to mean that he is an unprincipled pragmatist—that he'll do anything which works so as to lead people to Christ. The end (evangelism) does not justify the means (watering down the gospel for the sake of a greater response). Paul never changes the gospel he preaches, but he does change how he approaches those to whom he is preaching.<sup>17</sup> There is no evidence anywhere in the New Testament that Paul would let personal considerations and cultural differences get in the way of the gospel. Paul was able to see the big picture and not to let non-essential things get in the way of his apostolic mission, which was to do everything possible so as to preach the gospel, so as to see people come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul now concludes the argument begun back in verse 1. Paul's readers were thoroughly conversant with athletic metaphors, just as in our own culture. Recall that the Isthmian Games were held every two years in Corinth, while the Olympic games were held nearby every four years. Paul's references to sporting events makes perfect sense in light of this widespread familiarity with the games and the athletic contests which composed them. In fact, because of the stress found in athletics upon personal sacrifice and self-control, referring to athletic events was a practice of philosophers as well as Jewish sources (Philo and 4 Maccabees).<sup>18</sup> Says Paul in verse 24, "*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.*"

In foot races, which were the first events held in the pentathlon, there is only one possible winner. This is why runners not only have to be careful to prepare themselves beforehand but to pace themselves during the race. Paul's point is simply that Christians are to go about the business of the kingdom of God with the same deliberation as that of a runner preparing for a race. "*Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.*" Competitors in such important races cannot be unprepared. They follow a strict training regimen. Olympic runners swore allegiance to Zeus that they would spend ten full months in preparation, during which they swore to live temperately during rigorous training. If they won their respective races they received a pine garland or celery wreath, which lasted but several days.

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<sup>15</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 136.

<sup>16</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 136.

<sup>17</sup> Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 432.

<sup>18</sup> Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary, 472.

Christians, on the other hand, are concerned with eternal things that cannot perish like a celery stalk. Whatever reward they receive (whether Paul means a literal crown or not is an open question) is one which will last forever (cf. 2 Timothy 4:8—*“Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing”*). Paul is clearly cognizant of this parallel in his own approach to ministry of the gospel and to the Christian life with that of an athlete. To be a faithful preacher of the gospel as well as a Christian seeking to persevere to the end in faith, requires the same determined attitude as that of someone preparing for a race. *“So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”* Boxing was one of the main features of Greek athletic games. A boxer must toughen up his hands so as to be able to endure a long fight. Shadow boxing didn’t cut it!<sup>19</sup>

Knowing what lies ahead, Paul understands exactly where the finish line is—he knows the direction he must go and how he must devote himself to the challenges ahead. Paul does not run aimlessly or beat the air. No, Paul has disciplined himself so that his body will not be consumed by those things which prevent him from competing effectively. Paul will not take the easy way, seek pleasure at the expense of personal discipline, so that through his own actions (especially the sin of sloth), he does not disqualify himself from receiving the prize for which he has trained. Contrary to some commentators, this assertion that Paul might be disqualified from the prize has nothing whatsoever to do with someone losing their salvation—this is a metaphor about how we approach the Christian life and does not speak to whether or not a Christian can lose their salvation.

What then, do we say by way of application?

Because we have been rescued from God’s wrath by Christ’s death upon the cross, and because we are reckoned righteous because Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us through faith, cultural things like food and drink become a matter of indifference—that is, unless someone thinks eating something or drinking something is wrong and stumbles when a stronger Christian flaunts their liberty in front of them. Christians must be willing to give up Christian liberty for a time so that a weak Christian becomes strong. But only for a time, and only until the weak become strong, and their consciences are no longer bound to things which God does not forbid. Part of our sanctification is learning how to responsibly enjoy our Christian liberty, which has been won for us by Christ.

Like Paul, in evangelistic contexts, we should strive to become all things to all people for the sake of the gospel. This does not mean changing or modifying the gospel to make it more palatable or acceptable to people. This does mean not letting trivial or cultural things to distract people from the key issue—that the law condemns us and that we are saved by Christ through the gospel. This simply means that if people are offended (and many will be), let them be offended by the preaching of Christ crucified, and not because of matters of food and drink. Paul was willing to do everything to remove obstacles for the sake of the gospel, because Paul knew that food and drink are nothing, but the gospel is the power of God unto salvation!

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<sup>19</sup> Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary, 472.