

1 Corinthians 9:1-27

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Date: 05 February 2023

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[0 : 01] As we look at this chapter, I want us to begin by trying to picture ourselves at a great big Christian conference. If you've been to one, that'll be easy.

Perhaps you haven't. Hundreds of people, a great glittering lineup of speakers, the A-list of celebrity preachers, the sort of people who get followed on Twitter.

You've got all the books on your bookshelf. You listen to their podcasts. These big names are there with their wives. They're mingling with people, signing books, taking selfies with people.

And then in comes a smaller man. He's less well-dressed, a bit shabby, if you're honest. He's come with a friend. You vaguely recognize him.

You don't know his name. You're not sure he's written a book or at least one not really worth reading. Now, in that room, okay, who do you want to go and speak to? Surely the A-list, right?

[1 : 04] Not this other man. But it turns out that this is the guy who started the whole thing. He's worked tirelessly to reach the lost, to build up the church. He's not what you'd call an impressive speaker.

And yet thousands have become Christians through his ministry. And yet he's refused to put his name on the publicity. He doesn't take any money at all for it.

And because of that, he has not such a big following. He's not as well-loved. He's considered a bit of a B-list preacher and pastor.

Now, it might surprise us to learn that that is how Paul, who wrote this letter in our Bibles, was viewed in Corinth and in the church that he's writing this letter to.

Paul, who had started this church, was being sidelined because different groups in the church had taken a shine to other preachers who had come to Corinth.

[2 : 05] And the other preachers seemed, frankly, just a cut above, more impressive, better speakers. They were exactly what Corinth loved in a speaker, sophisticated, trendy, good with words.

And so they gained an instant following. But Paul has to defend his ministry now. He was seen as weak, his preaching simplistic, his style a bit mediocre.

And Paul, in chapter 9 of this letter, just dropping straight in, okay, if you want the full context, you'll have to read the letter. But at this point, in chapter 9, he's defending one way that his ministry is different from the other preachers in town.

And he wants the church to know why his ministry is so different, not only so that they will have him back, receive him as their apostle, pastor, teacher, but ultimately so that the church learns to follow Paul's, that is, the apostle's pattern of gospel ministry.

What do I mean? If you just glance down at verses 1 to 3 there, he begins this, Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?

[3 : 25] Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you. You are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. This is my defense, then, to those who sit in judgment on me.

So Paul is having to defend his being an apostle. That is, one having been sent personally by Jesus to speak his words to others. And as he does so, he wants the church, he wants we ourselves tonight to take on his way of thinking in our life together, our ministry, which is a bigger thing than it might sound.

What does a truly wise, a truly loving church look and feel like? Well, to the surprise of this church back then, and perhaps to us tonight, Paul says a loving church looks and feels like giving up our rights.

Giving up our rights. Not things that we think are our rights, but really aren't, but actually proper God-given rights.

Now, to get us there, Paul's going to show us first that he does have himself a God-given right, but then he has himself given up that right, and why?

[4 : 47] So that he can gain more people for Jesus. Okay, so tonight we've got two brief points, followed by some implications for us, a bit of a different way than we normally do it, but that's how we're going to do it.

Firstly, then, Paul has a God-given right. Just look with me at verse 4. See if you can spot the repeated word. Don't we have a right to food and drink?

Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as the other apostles do, the Lord's brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right not to work for a living?

It's quite easy to spot, isn't it? Right uses it three times in as many verses. He wants us to see here he's not talking about these things like their perks of his position or personal preferences that he has, but about rights that he does actually have as an apostle.

And the obvious answer to these questions in Corinth at the time was, Paul, of course you have the right. Of course you do. Don't we have the right to eat and drink? Obviously we don't want you to starve.

[5 : 59] Don't we have the right to be married, to have a family along with us? Of course, why wouldn't we want you to have those things? Don't we have the right to stop working outside of the church?

Yes, and we can pay you. It's clear that these were rights that the other preachers in town were making use of. Verse 5, the other apostles and so on, they're all doing it.

Nobody's questioning their right to do these things. But Paul seems to stress one of these rights in particular. If he spotted it, as we read, it's the one he explains in verse 14.

He says, The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. Now that's what he's saying back in verse 6. Not that he shouldn't have to work for a living at all, but that he has a right not to have to take on outside work to live on, as well as preaching the gospel.

Instead, he has a right, he says, to live off his gospel ministry. He goes hard on that, doesn't he? He illustrates it in three ways. In verse 7, nobody signs up to be a soldier for free, he says.

[7 : 12] Nobody plants a vineyard without having a couple of slaves. Nobody has flocks of sheep and goats without bringing some milk back for the morning porridge. In short, all these people, they live off their labor.

And Paul is saying he has the right to do that too, to be paid for preaching the gospel. And this is such an important part of his case, okay? He's not claiming that right because the other preachers are doing it, or because even the church agrees with him on it, though they do.

He's claiming the right because God has given him that right in Scripture. Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn't the law say the same thing, verse 9?

For it's written in the law of Moses, do not muzzle an ox while it's treading out the grain. Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he?

He's saying this is a right in God's word, a real, a proper right that he can claim as an apostle. If you're not sure how we get from oxes to apostles, don't worry.

[8 : 19] Jesus says the same thing in Luke 10, verse 7. And to the apostles, the laborer deserves his wages. So Paul just makes sure that this right of his is not up for discussion.

It's a right that God has given preachers and pastors in his word to be paid, supported for their gospel ministry. So in theory, in theory, says Paul, I could have given up working years ago.

Acts 18, if you were to read that, tells us when he got to Corinth, this city, he found straight away people who were of his trade, Priscilla and Aquila, and he joined them in their tent-making business.

Now that is how Paul put food on the table while he was preaching for this church. He was churning out tents to make his living. He wasn't being paid by the church.

Clearly that is very different from the way the other preachers were doing it. And he says in verses 11 and 12, arguing kind of from the lesser to the greater, if others have this right of support from you, well, shouldn't we have it all the more?

[9 : 33] So Paul insists he has this divinely ordained, God-given right in Scripture. Just to pause for a second before we go on, that's not where we're finishing today, okay?

But it's worth saying incidentally that Scripture does actually teach this, that gospel workers should be supported for their gospel work. In some circles, what's known sometimes as tent-making, or more technically bivocational ministry, is kind of held up as the ideal situation, or the kind of super-spiritual option.

But actually, Paul makes it clear it was a necessity that he fell back on in order to help the gospel forward in Corinth. Sometimes it's necessary for a preacher to have another job on the side, but ordinarily, that shouldn't be the church's expectation of those who serve them.

And indeed, in Corinth, they did expect to pay their preachers. So we might ask, if God gives Paul the right to be paid, and the church are used to paying, what's the problem?

Why all the fuss? Well, this is our second point. Paul gives up his right, he says, so he can gain those whom he serves. If you glance down at the second half of verse 12, verse 12 is the key verse in this chapter for understanding his point.

[11 : 04] He says, but we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. So he's made this big push, hasn't he?

I've got this right, only to say, we're not going to use it. We're not going to use it. He's not pressing his right so he can cash in. He makes that really clear, verse 15.

I'm not writing this in the hope you will do this for me. In fact, he's fighting for his right, not to use his rights, and still be viewed as a bona fide apostle of Christ.

Now, if this is hard to follow, partly because it's bizarre to us culturally, isn't it? All the talk we hear of rights is claiming our rights or fighting for the rights of others.

When someone says, I have a right to, normally we don't ask, well, do you want to use that right? Or do you want to give it up? People want their rights, don't we?

[12 : 11] And that's strange to us, to hear Paul say, I'm going to let go of my right. It was even weirder in Corinth. Remember, this is his defense to those who would question whether he really was an apostle.

And this is why the church doubted him, because he's not acting like an apostle. He's not behaving like the others. When the other apostles, the other preachers come to Corinth, they do take the church's money.

They live well off of their ministry. And so it's possible that Paul, not charging for preaching the gospel, made people question the value of his ministry.

Now, we do this all the time, don't we? If you buy anything online, if you're like me, you don't go for the cheapest option. During the pandemic, no one went online and bought the cheapest pair of set of hair clippers, did they?

Because you get what you pay for. And in the marketplace of gospel preaching, then, Paul not charging any money, possibly just added to the sense that his preaching was not as valuable, that he was something less than a proper apostle.

[13 : 21] If he was sent by Christ personally, surely he would be worth paying to hear. But here is his point. Here's his defense. Here's why he's doing what he's doing.

Verse 12, we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. Why does he give up his rights to be paid?

Not because the gospel isn't valuable. It's actually the opposite. Because he has an invaluable gospel that should not be obstructed, should not be tripped up on its way through Corinth.

That is so key to what he wants the church to take home. In fact, it's what this whole section in the letters teaching, just glance back, chapter 8, verse 9.

Chapter 8, verse 9. What does he say to the church? Notice the parallel. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

[14 : 26] See the parallel? He said in chapter 8, consider how using your God-given right could actually put obstacles in the way of other Christians in their walk with Christ.

Now he's saying, consider how using your God-given rights could put obstacles in the way of others on the outside hearing the gospel clearly. Do you see the parallel there, the big point?

It's key to this section. He's giving up his rights for the sake of others because he's not just defending his ministry for its own sake, but so that the church will see this pattern of ministry as the pattern of ministry our life together as a church, our work together as a church.

The pattern is knowing that you have a right, but choosing not to use it out of love for others. The body building itself up in love is our aim as a church.

That is why Paul's so keen, isn't it, for us to see how love works out through life and ministry. Love is the pattern that we follow. And love is, he says, setting aside your rights so that others gain Christ and grow in Christ.

[15 : 48] You could, Paul, have been paid to preach. Could that have hindered the gospel in a city like Corinth? Well, yeah. Firstly, in a really obvious way, if people have to pay to hear Paul preach, then surely that kind of prices the very poorest out of the gospel.

They couldn't access it. Or if maybe by paying him, the church thought that they were buying him off, whether perhaps paying him to preach some things and not others, or reserving his preaching just to them.

You can imagine the conversations in the church office. Paul, don't forget who's paying you to be here. Well, none of that, says Paul. None of that.

The gospel is not for sale. Rather, verse 16, woe to me if I do not preach the gospel. So, rather than restrict him, which is what we naturally think, isn't it?

If we claim our rights, we will be free. Rather than restrict him, Paul letting go of his rights frees him from human priorities, human preferences, just as he gives up the rights, his rights, to serve others in love, so he says he uses his freedom to become a servant to all, to the Jews, to those under the law, to those outside the law, to the weak.

[17 : 14] By giving up his rights, he gains his freedom, and he uses his freedom to gain others. I've become all things to all people, so that by all possible means, I might save some, he says.

I do it all for the sake of the gospel. He has reached now into the lives of everyone, because he has not tied himself down, financially, or in any other way, to serving only a certain group of people.

He's given up his rights, so that he might reach into the lives of all, so that some might come to be saved. So, what does Paul want us to take away from this?

Not just a big idea, I hope we do take away a big idea, but also some ways that it might work its way out in our lives. There's one big idea, there's a million implications. I just want to begin to help us think through how this might work out in the life of our church, in our lives together.

there. We've picked up the big idea in this section, is to give up your rights in order to serve others in love. And Paul's focus here is serving others on the outside, non-Christian people, so that he might win more of them to Christ.

[18 : 37] So, the big idea, if you like, is set aside your rights out of love for the lost. Now, for Paul, the big right is payment. And for some of you, that might be the thing, mightn't it?

Perhaps beginning gospel work overseas, in a church plant, in some other context, that in order to do it requires you to give up finance, give up opportunity.

Maybe it might involve dividing your time, as Paul did, between gospel work and other forms of employment. As I said, it's not ideal, but coming full circle, sometimes it is necessary.

And Paul would not have us let that opportunity go if it would mean us taking the gospel free of charge into communities, contexts, that do not yet have the gospel.

That might be for some of us, mightn't it? The preachers in Corinth were only sharing the gospel if they got paid to do it. Well, let that not ever be us. Let us not look for wealth before we are willing to share the gospel with those who haven't heard it.

[19 : 57] But for most of us, giving up our rights out of love for the lost is going to be more, more everyday, but no less radical. For instance, Scripture gives us the right to marry and have families.

Paul brings that up, doesn't he? He talks about bringing along a believing wife. What do we do with that right? Firstly, notice the caveat, and this should be said, believing, a believing wife.

And it's a point that needs to be made, isn't it? That being all things to all people to reach son, it never goes beyond the boundaries of God's word. This is freedom in Christ. And so, Paul isn't saying to us, you overstep, transgress God's law in order to reach people.

That's not what he's saying. The phrase that comes to mind with regard to this, a believing wife, is flirt to convert. Have you heard that? That idea?

That is not what Paul is teaching. Okay, that is against the word of God. Doesn't Paul say, be all things to all people? Well, yes, as far as God's word permits us to go.

[21 : 10] Do we not have a right to take longer? Believing wife, he says. Yes. Not another kind of wife. Now, taking this example of relationships, marriage, family, life, dating and marrying somebody who isn't a Christian is not showing love for the lost.

It can't do that. We might tell ourselves that. Just looking at you guys, a bit younger. We might tell ourselves, you, flirt to convert.

No. It might be love of other kinds, but not love for this person's soul. And the Bible is clear. We're not free as Christians to do that for any reason. Paul is not saying overstep the boundaries of God's word in order to reach the lost.

It's freedom in Christ. But the challenge, I think, really comes on this point to Christian families. What do we do with that God-given right to marry, to have families?

Families bring responsibilities. They bring spiritual responsibilities. But sometimes family can take a priority in our lives in such a way that causes Christians to withdraw.

[22 : 29] Sometimes withdraw from church life. Sometimes lose friendships. Sometimes forgo opportunities to witness to those on the outside. Life gets fuller.

Life gets busier. But here's the question. Should that right to marry and have children be used for our own satisfaction for a few years or for the eternal gain of others?

If we're married or have children, the question that Paul would ask us is, how might we turn our marriages and families outwards in order that we might through marriage and family reach others outside?

Family life opens up opportunities, doesn't it? That might be closed otherwise. Opportunities to meet other families, children, nursery, school, clubs. Perhaps giving up our rights, this thing, our freedom in Christ might involve doing dinner time a bit differently in order to have a neighbor over involved in family life.

Perhaps it might mean going out with another family to the park on a Saturday morning to get to know them. Things in which we have freedom, things in which God's word doesn't constrain us when and how to have dinner, how to organize our time.

[23 : 51] Time will be full, but how might we use it to reach others? There are going to be busier seasons that close off opportunities for us as well, but Paul wouldn't want us to be so set in our ways and so precious about our routines and our lifestyle that we are not looking anymore for windows and doors, for opportunities to share the good news with others.

Our right to have a family or our right to be single isn't the last word. If we share Paul's love for the lost, his desire for all people to hear the gospel, that's surprising, isn't it?

Is that what you thought you would hear when you came to church this evening? Family, marriage, children are not the last word in Christ for the gospel.

Scripture gives us a right to live freely, to eat and drink and dress and speak as we want to do. We have freedom in these things. But, says Paul, when you decide what, how, to eat, drink, dress, speak, ask, how is the way I'm doing those things, those decisions, helping or hindering others that I know in my life from hearing the gospel clearly?

You walk in your eating and drinking, your dressing, speaking, would help them, says Paul, to know Christ, to hear the good news from you, or what might be a stumbling block?

[25 : 26] Or to take this to the level where I think Paul's really aiming, is as a church body, you know, are there ways perhaps, as a church, that we unhelpfully shape our ministry around a certain type of person, in a way that might make friends of yours, people that you know uncomfortable, to come, to feel welcome?

I would love to hear if there are ways. It's a conversation that we should be having together, isn't it? And I think it's a question I'd encourage you to ask each other later on next week.

How do you think, how does this play out for you? How do you think someone in my life could be helped to hear the gospel through decisions that I make? what might I need to hold on to more lightly to give someone else the opportunity of knowing Christ?

That's the question that Paul would have the church ask. You're giving up our rights won't feel comfortable. It won't feel impressive to put love for the lost first and ourselves second.

Not in a world that prizes, fighting, claiming rights, standing up for your way of doing it. We won't be praised by the world for this. We might even be looked down on as Paul was.

[26 : 49] But Paul leaves us with a final image to encourage us this evening. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize, he says. Run in such a way as to get the prize.

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Brothers and sisters, Paul is clear.

This gospel training, this discipline in our lives, this not allowing our freedom to be as broad as our desire, but training our freedom into gospel channels, it is tough.

He calls it strict training. But he says there is an eternal prize waiting for us at the end. For those who run the race, not in our own interest, but in love for the lost, to bring them the gospel by any means possible that they may have Christ.

So while this evening this is a one-off sermon, let this not be a one-off question. Keep training. Keep running. Keep coming back to this.

[28 : 05] Keep asking each other. Talk to me about it, about our church. Keep loving those around you who don't yet love Jesus. And keep helping each other to do that.

What does love look like for the lost? It looks like giving up our rights that they may gain Christ. We are a family, we are a body together, and Paul wants us together to learn that love for the lost.

So let's pray for God's help. Thank you. Thank you.