



My Rights or Christ's Cross?

1 Corinthians 9:1-26

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This morning I want to continue our study of First Corinthians by looking at chapter nine. St. Paul is still dealing with this issue of their eating at the banquets in the pagan temples. You'll remember from last week, Paul had told them not to do this, but they argued that it was okay, based on their *knowledge* that (1) the gods in those temples weren't real – just idols of wood or stone, and (2) that as Christians we're free to eat what we want – that what we eat doesn't matter to God.

Paul's response was basically this: "Yes, you're right, at least so far as understanding that those idols are just idols and that God doesn't care what we eat." But then he asks, "What about your brothers and sisters who aren't as strong in the faith as you? You may be free to eat in the temple. You may be able to go into those temples and not fall back into idolatry, but in exercising your freedom, you're encouraging your weaker brothers and sisters to go too – and when they go into those temples they *do* fall back into idolatry and jeopardise their souls! It's not enough to have knowledge. You have to use your knowledge *with love* – in fact that's the real measure of your spiritual maturity." Paul reminds them that in every decision we make, we need to put the Gospel first. We need to ask, "If I exercise my freedom, will it damage the cause of the Gospel? Which is more important: my freedom to do something that in the long run doesn't really matter or the eternal souls of other men and women?" For that reason Paul says, "If food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat."

And there were no doubt some people in Corinth as there are no doubt some people here who said, "I'm not giving up *my* rights, *my* freedoms. That's all well and good for you to stand up there and preach, but let's see you do it!" And St. Paul anticipates that answer, so for the next chapter he sort of says, "Okay, let's talk about me. Let's see what "rights" I've

given up for the sake of the Gospel. Let's put it in perspective. I'm asking you to give up eating in the pagan temples. That's not much compared to what I've given up for you." Look at 9:1-2. He says:

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? 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.

Paul decides to kill two birds with one stone here. Remember that they've been rejecting him as a legitimate apostle and part of that was due to his not accepting their financial support. The other apostles received their support from the churches they served and Paul did the same thing at first, but at some point, probably when he was at Thessalonica, he stopped and went back to his old career of making tents in order to support his ministry. The Corinthians used that against him. "If you were a *real* apostle, the churches would support you instead you having to work making tents!" They also might have been ashamed of him, because in the Greek tradition teachers and philosophers were always supported by the students and wealthy patrons who followed them. It was a status symbol to be able to support a well-known teacher – and Paul was denying them this.

He says to them, "You want to talk about being in free in Christ? If anyone is free, then I am. I'm an apostle. I know you have your doubts, but do I not meet the qualifications? Did I not meet the resurrected Christ when I was on the road to Damascus? You of all people ought to recognise me. I'm the one who came here and taught you the truths of the Gospel. Through my ministry you came to saving faith in Jesus. There may be some new people among you who weren't there when I was ministering to you and who might doubt my calling, but for those of you who have been there all along...come on! Your very existence as a church is the seal of my apostleship in the Lord!" He goes on in verses 3-6:

This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord [that's probably James and Jude] and Cephas [that's Peter]? Or is it

only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?

The Corinthians were all about asserting their rights, so that's where Paul starts. The first thing Paul does is to assert his "rights" as an apostle. Just like the other apostles, he has a right to support – to food and drink. He has a right to be married and to receive support for his wife too. He has a right not to have to work two jobs so that he can be in the ministry. He goes on in verse 7:

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?

We have lots of military people here. How many of you served in the air force or the navy at your own expense? None of you, of course! How many of you have planted a vineyard or a garden or fruit trees and yet have never had the opportunity to eat the fruit? How many of you raise livestock and don't get to benefit from the milk – or the eggs or the meat? It's nonsense to think that any of us would work, but get no benefit from it. That would be slavery. But it's not just custom that tells us this. God tells us too. In verses 8 to 10 Paul takes us back to the Old Testament:

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?

Well, yes, God is concerned that the oxen not be abused or starved, but in giving that law to the Jews back in the time of Moses, it was to teach them a more important principle:

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.

If the ox ought to share in the fruit of his labour, how much more should a man? The principle that God teaches us is that if you reap the benefit of someone's ministry, you need to have a part in it in some material way. This is one reason why we collect an offering every week and why finances are an important part of

the life of the church – it all makes ministry here possible. We’re struggling with this as a congregation right now. Most months here at Living Word we do meet our budget, but that’s not saying a whole lot when you consider just how lean our budget is – far leaner than most churches. We should be doing better than just meeting our lean budget if we’re thinking about the future of our ministry in the community. Paul goes on in verses 11 to 12:

If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? 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.

This is a basic principle in the Body of Christ. Ministry requires the support of those to whom it ministers. If you’ve been blessed and helped along in your spiritual growth and your family changed and your whole life enriched, how much more, Paul says, should you not therefore support those who have helped you with material benefits? This is how God has setup ministry in his kingdom. Look at verses 13 and 14:

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?

Remember back to when Joshua led the Israelites into Canaan and they divided up the land among the tribes? Which tribe didn’t get any land? That’s right, the Levites. The Levites were the priestly tribe. Instead of living off the land farming or raising livestock or working at some craft, they were scattered among all the tribes. Their job was to minister to the people and in return the people supported the Levites and their ministry with the tithe that God established and the other offerings they gave. Remember, not all the meat from the sacrifices was burned on the altar. No, God directed that only part of it be burned and that the rest go to priests for food. The same went for the wine, the olive oil, and the various grain offerings. This is what God commanded. So Paul says:

In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

That should really settle any argument about this issue. When it comes to those who do object, they always seem to point to the handful of ministers who give the rest a bad name – the lazy ministers or the guys who cry for money on TV and then spend millions on fancy houses and cars. And yet guys like that don’t negate the obligation we have. They show us more than anything that the modern church has lost her authority over her ministers. “Independent” ministries, ministers, and churches go contrary to the model we see in the New Testament where authority structures were put in place to keep just these sorts of things from happening. That’s one reason why we Anglicans still have our bishops – it’s part of their job to remove from ministry the guys who are lazy or teaching false doctrine or who are simply milking the people.

But now Paul comes to his point. He’s been showing the Corinthians that he does in fact have a right to their support, just like they grant the other apostles do. He has the right, *but* he’s given it up. Look at verse 15:

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.

It’s not that our rights aren’t important, but there’s something more important than our rights and that’s the cause of the Gospel. That’s where love comes into it, and that’s what the Corinthians were missing. He says in verses 16-18:

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! 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.

Paul says, “Yes, I’m free in Christ, but when it comes to the proclamation of the Gospel I don’t feel like a free man. Christ met me on the Damascus Road and he charged me with this ministry. It’s what I do. It’s who I am. It’s my reason for living. So yes, I’m free, but I’m also a

slave to Christ. I can’t *not* do this.” He goes on:

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.

Have you ever done something just because you wanted to and just because it needed doing and was a help for others? And you did it needing no payment or thanks, because doing it was reward enough? That’s what Paul’s getting at. When it came to Paul’s ministry the reward was the work itself – the joy of sharing Christ with men and women and seeing them come to new life. It’s not that the apostles like Peter, James, or Jude, who received support were doing anything wrong in accepting payment – and neither would Paul be doing anything wrong in receiving payment. But Paul sees his working for no pay as part of the message itself. He’s made it an object lesson for the people he’s evangelising. His proclaiming of the Gospel “free of charge” is a way that he’s chosen to actually live out the message that God’s grace is free.

And now Paul gives a litany of specific examples of what it means to be free for the sake of the Gospel. Look at verses 19 to 23:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.

That’s the key and that’s what it means to live with the knowledge of freedom and yet subject your actions and way of life to the love of others. “Yes, I’m a free man,” he says, “but I’m willing to sacrifice that – to live as a slave to others – if it means showing them the love of Christ.” And here’s where the application goes from the specific situation of Paul giving up his right to receive support from the churches to the Corinthians and all of us being willing to sacrifice our rights for the greater cause of the Gospel – to give up what we want in order to show the love of God to others. Paul says:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one

outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. 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.

Paul sets himself before us as an example – and it’s one of the most challenging examples in all of Scripture. He calls us – free men and women who can do what we want – to set aside our personal desires and ambitions and preferences in order to make the cause of Christ our own cause. He’s not saying that we compromise our morals or the message of the Gospel itself. Some have used this passage to justify that. He’s calling on us to be willing to put the cross of Christ before ourselves.

As I said at the beginning, Paul kills two birds with one stone here. First, he defends his authority as an apostle. They used the fact that he refused their support as evidence that he wasn’t an apostle and now he’s first asserted his right to their support, but explained that it’s precisely because of his calling as an apostle and because of the gospel ministry that it entails, that he has freely chosen to give up that right – so that he can share the message of free grace for free.

But more importantly, is how he addresses their assertion of their own rights – to go and eat in the pagan temples. He warned them that while it might not do them any harm, that it was causing their weaker brothers and sisters to fall into idolatry. And yet they still wanted to assert their rights. Paul’s now put it in perspective. When you consider that he’s given up his right to support from the church, and in doing that subjected himself to long hours, basically working two jobs, all for the sake of his ministry of proclaiming the Gospel, doesn’t their demanding their right to eat in the temples seem awfully petty? “I gave up my salary and my leisure time for the sake of the cross,” Paul says, “Can’t you give up something as small as eating in the temples for the same reason?”

He closes with an example and an exhortation. Look at verses 24-27:

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. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 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.

Corinth was home to the Isthmian Games. It was like the Olympics and when you signed up to compete, you signed up ten months in advance and were subject to strict training for those ten months. Just like our Olympics, an athlete didn’t just show up on the day of the competition and expect to win. It took focus and it took dedication. It took self-control.

And the same goes for the boxer. He doesn’t just enter the ring and start swinging his arms around. If a boxer wants to land a punch, he has to practice and train and exercise self-control over the long haul. To win the race or to take out an opponent in the ring takes focus and commitment. You have to know what you want and you have to work hard and stay focused on your goal.

Paul’s saying we need to do the same thing in the Christian life. Brothers and sisters, too much of the time we live the Christian life like the runner who shows up on the day of the race or the boxer who jumps into the ring and just starts swinging wildly at the air. We squander our time and our talents and our resources on the things of this world when we should be in training for the Kingdom. The Corinthians were living for the things of this world – for the here and now – and forgetting that they had a higher calling to the Gospel. They looked at things and said, “Hey, I want to do that and I’m free to do it...so I’ll just do it.” But they weren’t considering the impact their exercise of freedom might have on others. If they weren’t concerned for the spiritual welfare of their brothers and sisters, you have to wonder if they had any care at all for the lost souls out in the world. They weren’t looking at life through the lens of the cross – through the lens of eternity. And yet it’s not just a Corinthian problem. It’s our problem too. Each of us needs to ask, “Am I running aimlessly? Am I

throwing punches at the air? Am I living with little or no thought for the goal? Am I just expecting to show up at the end to be given my prize? Or am I living my life with eternity in mind and in a way in which I’m willing to give up my rights for the sake of the cross of Christ?”

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we give you thanks that through the shed blood of Jesus you have made us free, but we also ask that you would remind us daily that you have set us free so that we can serve you. Father, make us people who exercise the fruit of the Spirit by showing self-control in living out our freedom and by learning to act in love in all things – love toward each other in the church, love for the lost souls in the world, and ultimately love for the cross of Christ. We ask this in his name. Amen.