

24ID3725

1 Corinthians 9:1-18 - Paul Practices What He Preaches

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August 21, 2024

1 Corinthians 9 tonight, verse 1. We're going to continue tonight with Paul's letter to the Corinthians, a church that he had started on his second missionary journey of the twenty-some years that he was out in the field planting churches.

It was a place that was uniquely.....actually know more about the Corinthian church than a lot of fellowships just by the coverage that the Lord gives it to us in His Word. Paul was very depressed when he arrived there. God eventually would come to appear to him directly and say, "Look, I'm going to keep an eye on you. I've got your back. No one's going to hurt you. I have a lot of people I want to reach." And Paul, after having been beat up and chased down the street and thrown in prison, was encouraged. And a work of the Lord was started. Paul, by the time he writes this letter, was in Ephesus on his third missionary journey where he would spend three years planting a church.

But in that place – maybe 5,6,7 years later – there were a lot of folks from the church here in Corinth that began to visit Paul. The church actually wrote him a few letters as well. And all of the letters and reports were filled with compromise and weakness and the worldliness that had kind of crept into the fellowship. Paul was sure God had planted this church; he says so early on in chapter 1. But they'd really gotten off course, and a lot of time the world had kind of crawled in. As a father to the church, as a pastor to the flock, Paul wanted to correct them; he wanted to encourage them to godliness. And so every question that was sent him.... I've mentioned to you several times he got at least one letter that we know about but we don't have; it's mentioned in chapter 5:9. These letters seem to be written in response to maybe other communications, but we have these two. But needless to say, Paul took everything that he had heard, and he compartmentalized it to speak to them directly, and he doesn't gloss over anything. He seems to kind of get down into the weeds with most of the things that are going on.

So, in the first four chapters, Paul talks to them about the side-taking that was taking place as pastors there had come and gone. And they used a lot of worldly standards to judge and analyze their pastors, their overseers. They talked about polish, and they talked about their scholarship or their appeal. And yet Paul said, "None of us died for you. Jesus did. And certainly not the judgment that He would use. Those are worldly standards." And he talked about worldly wisdom versus spiritual wisdom.

In chapter 5, he spoke about the sexual immorality that the church was allowing in their midst under the guise of being liberal and open-minded and embracing these liberal ways. It emboldened them to have a spirit of pride rather than sadness.

In chapter 6, he spoke to them about lawsuits as they tried to get their pound of flesh before the world's wisdom rather than seeking to settle their differences amongst the body, filled with the Spirit. He talked to them about being the temple of the Holy Spirit.

In chapter 7, he addressed marriage and remarriage and divorce, especially in the situations that the Lord hadn't spoken about; that these, now, believers would find themselves in.

And then beginning last week in chapter 8, and it will really continue to chapter 11, Paul spends a good deal of time from various angles speaking to us about the liberty that we have in Christ; and in particular the use of that liberty – that we are free to do a lot of things, but it's not always helpful, it's not always encouraging, it can certainly be used by the enemy as a detriment of the growth of others. And last week, we looked at all of chapter 8, and there's this great divorce between truth and the love of God in the hearts of the people. And so exercise your liberty in Christ in such a way that you don't hurt the weakest among you. Oh, yeah, you're free to do a lot of things, but you're limited by how beneficial is it for them. He gave the example of eating meat that had been offered to idols in idol temples, and there were lots of them here. Because of the abundance of those meats, butcher shops sold them cheaply. Some believers coming out of that lifestyle couldn't stomach the idea of eating the meat, knowing where it had come from. Others could have cared less; it was a good deal on the steak or whatever. Paul used it as the issue of the day to teach this issue of liberty and pointed out that the two extremes were the legalist who really....everything was black and white, and then somehow the other guy, who was just free to do everything doesn't really care what happens to anyone around him.

And we talked last week about how gray areas are best governed by the sensitivity that you and I should have to the weak. If you're not sure, if there's a lot of gray and a lot of open spaces, we would be wiser to deny our individual liberty for the sake of someone else's weakness. Paul called that a great step of love and a great step of faith. In fact, if you read verse 8 through verse 13 in particular, it kind of sums up the weakness of some of the folks in the church was on unfounded ground, if you will. You couldn't really make a case for their fear and their anxiety about it, even their hesitancy. Well Paul says, "You meet the weak by the love that God has given you, and you deny yourself so that they can walk with Jesus with a clear conscience." He even said he knew that nothing about idols or food had anything to do with our relationship with the Lord, but we have to be interested in how they're doing or how we are taking care of each other.

So tonight in chapter 9 – and we're only going to go through verse 18 tonight – Paul will use himself to illustrate the setting aside of liberty for the sake of not stumbling others or, if you will, placing greater value on ministry and outreach and love and support than on individual freedoms. In our verses this evening, Paul will establish his rights; it'll take fourteen verses. And then he will say, "Here's why I'm not using them."

So the outline's pretty easy – two points. But I think we have to learn from Paul that you've got to do more than "Do as I say," you've got to say to people "Do as I do," and that's certainly Paul's call.

So in this context (and don't lose the context or you'll go astray), verse 1 of chapter 9, Paul goes on. And let's read verse 13 (of chapter 8), "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." That's the context. Verse 1, "Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?" Paul begins by asking them four rhetorical questions designed to establish who he is and what his rights are in terms of his position, especially towards the saints in Corinth. And so some of them, as we will read later on, were even questioning his right to tell them anything. "Hey, you're not our pastor anymore. You're not around here. That was years ago." "Am I not an apostle?" The title is found eighty-one times in the Bible. It is used almost exclusively of the twelve men commissioned by Jesus for that special office. You might remember when the Lord first chose the twelve, there in Luke 6, He chose these twelve after a night of prayer, and He named them apostles. The word "apostles" literally means to be sent out ones, but they were given a title that is different and unique, and they were given the responsibility – these twelve (Judas being replaced by Paul) – of establishing the Scriptures and establishing church doctrine. You read about the early church in Acts 2, you will read that they continued (the church did) steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine. So they were the ones that God established through whom His Word would be set forth. I said to you we replaced Judas with Paul; that certainly was God's choice. If you read Acts 1:26, the boys – now filled with the Spirit – were starting to analyze the Scriptures, and Peter said, "Hey, we've got to replace Judas," and they chose Matthias; but he was never heard from again. He just kind of came and went. The apostles – these twelve – had the criteria from the Scriptures that they were to have seen the Lord, and they were supported in their ministries by tremendous signs and wonders. 2 Corinthians 12:12 says, "Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished with all perseverance, in signs and wonders with great and mighty deeds." So they are at a unique place; not that we don't have God's Spirit, not that we don't see signs and wonders. But they were set apart, if you will, by them. And, as such, they were quickly known, I think, by the church.

As an office, there were only twelve of them. And yet the ministry of an apostle – a delegate, a messenger – is a broad word, and you will find the word "apostle" applied to Barnabas, for example, and several others. But that's in a general sense of commission, not in terms of the office that they held.

Paul will call himself an apostle some nineteen times, and he spends two particular chapters in the Bible defending that calling - this chapter and 2 Corinthians 12. He said of himself, in 1 Corinthians 15:8, "I've kind of been born out of due time." That's how he saw himself. He was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles; Peter to the Jews. And these twelve have a special place in the kingdom. Jesus, in Matthew 19:28, said, "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the

twelve tribes of Israel.” In Revelation 21:14, when there’s a description of the New Jerusalem, if you will, you will read there (towards the end of chapter 21), that this new city of Jerusalem, that the Lord is going to bring down, has a wall around the city that has twelve foundations, and on each of the foundations there’s the name of one of the apostles. So these guys were unique. Right? God chose them for a special purpose. And, like I said, they came with tremendous power. I think we mentioned – maybe once or twice lately – that Paul used this power from the Lord to curse that sorcerer Elymas, who was trying to get in the way of Paul’s ministry there in Cyprus (Acts 13). You might remember Peter’s dealing with Ananias and Sapphira, who tried to misrepresent what they had given to the Lord (there in Acts 5), and they both ended up falling dead at the church. And then you will read something very interesting, “Then everyone was in fear of the apostles.” Well, I would think so!

Needless to say, Paul says, “Am I not an apostle?” That meant something. Not only that, “Am I not free?” You know, the Corinthians wanted to flaunt their freedom well, but they didn’t want Paul to use his. And yet he had tremendous authority. “Have I not seen the Lord?” Back in Acts 1, one of the prerequisites that the disciples set amongst themselves was the requirement of an apostle was that they saw the Lord. Well Paul did....outside of Damascus, several more times over the years as the Lord came to encourage him.

And then he said, in verse 2 to them, “If I am not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you. For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.” Or, if you want, “Hey, you’re the fruit of my life.” The Corinthians could challenge his apostleship because they didn’t want to hear from him in many ways, but they certainly couldn’t argue that Paul had been the fellow that had come, spent a year and a half there preaching under very difficult circumstances, had been empowered by God’s Spirit, had seen (according to Acts 18) tons of folks get saved. So Paul.....look, the context is using your liberty. But he starts off with, “Do you recognize who I am?” The word “seal” here, “You’re my seal,” the word “seal” in Greek is a word that means to mark as genuine, if you will. It is a stamp of authenticity. And Paul literally says to them, “The merchandise is the real McCoy. I’m an apostle. You’re the church, you’re saved. You’re the fruit of the ministry” that Paul had brought and proven in the church in Corinth. They might not be aware of any of his work anywhere else, but they had to know Paul had come to town and the work that God had done through him, and they should respect his place and receive his direction with respect.

So he goes on, and he said, verse 3, “My defense to those who examine me is this.” “Examine,” “diakrino.” It means to inspect. It’s a legal term. It means to investigate. “Here’s my answer to those who would want to scrutinize my apostolic ministry.” Paul could have gotten angry. “I want names of the people that are questioning me. I’ve got this idea for praying about their blindness.” He’s been a tough guy in the past. But for Paul, the principle and the lesson about calling in leadership was that Paul didn’t have an inflated ego; he didn’t....he could have, maybe, stood on those grounds. But he had nothing to hide, no power trip. So, look, “Hey, check me out. I’ve got nothing to hide.” The word for “defense,” here in verse 3, is just that. Paul would clearly establish his

rights. He did so with a long series of rhetorical questions. In fact, if you start in verse 3 and read down to verse 18, he asks fourteen questions in all. They're all rhetorical. It's a good way to make a defense, if you will. Though his position could demand support for his rights, Paul is interested that they see in him a pattern of self-denial so that they might practice the same thing when it comes to their liberty. It isn't because he didn't have rights; he had plenty as an apostle. But he loved them enough to set them aside so that he wouldn't stumble anyone, including those he was trying to reach.

So he says, in verse 4, "Do we have no right to eat and drink? Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord," (James and John) "and Cephas?" (Peter) "Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working?" "Can't we choose to eat and drink?" That was a reference, I think, to the previous chapter when he was talking about the food offered to idols. "Could we not have the same privilege?" The word "privilege" here is the Greek word "exousia," which just meant exactly that, a privilege. "Don't we have a privilege to take my wife or their wife?" Paul, at this point, was probably not married. But, "Don't we have the right to be able to take them with us in serving, like Peter and some of the other apostles, supported by the church?" I have rarely personally gone to minister far away from home without taking my wife with me. If folks want to fly me to the East coast – and we get a lot of invitations because of the radio, kind of makes you popular; once they get to know you, they rarely ask me back; but the first time through, not so bad – and I'll usually say, "I'll come if you pay for my wife to come with me" because I don't like to leave without her. She's very helpful, especially if the time is long, especially if there are, maybe, women or a women's group that she might be able to minister to. I have watched over the years ministers constantly away from home doing the "work of God" while their family suffers, and they end up with difficult marriages or kids that they don't have parents involved. I don't think it's wise. The early apostles apparently didn't think so either because Paul makes that as a comment. "Shouldn't we have the same rights these others have, that you've offered to them?" Apparently their judgments against Paul, in his absence, had been pretty severe, which is why he asked these questions. "Why am I held to a different standard?" He even adds, sarcastically (remember, I keep telling you sarcastic, it's in the Bible, it's a gift of the spirit...not sure which spirit, but it's a gift of the spirit), in verse 6, "Or is it just me and Barnabas that you feel should not be supported in the ministry and would rather just have us continue to work in our secular job?" Paul's point will be that he certainly felt that an amount of financial support from those in the church there in Corinth – in light of the work that he had done there and the calling of God and the fruit that had come – and he had spent most of his time building and laboring, building tents. "Isn't it a good thing that I should be supported in the work that God has set before me?" His point was that the apostles had every right to be married, every right to be supported by the churches in their ministries – even taking their wives along, if possible – eating and drinking as they saw fit. Paul just wondered why his case was so different because he was getting some pushback.

Now, look, Paul is simply sharing these things to establish his right so he might say to them, "Though I have them, I choose not to use them because I don't want to stumble

you. I don't want to bring myself into some kind of condemnation in your eyes or hinder, somehow, the work of God. For His work is far more valuable to me than my personal rights." That's his argument. So, don't stop in verse 6 and go, "Well...." No. You've got to take the whole argument.

Now he uses three appropriate illustrations, starting in verse 7, and he says this, "Who ever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock?" Those who go to fight are fed and clothed and housed, transported and equipped by others. No one rushes to the front on his own dime. It's the service that they bring to others. If someone plants a vineyard, it's a lot of work. It's an arduous, time-consuming, takes lots of effort, and when the fruit comes, it's usually the planter who gets to taste the first fruit, if you will, of his labors. Same thing with the shepherd. Tending a flock will allow you to drink the milk of the flocks for him to sustain himself in long hours of care and the guiding to greener pastures, and the protection, and the time alone in the wilderness. It makes perfect sense. No one would argue the point. Paul's point is this: why would these self-evident truths and practices not be allowed to those who labor as a vineyard planter or a shepherd or a soldier in the work of the Lord? Why would they be held to some other different kind of consideration?

He goes on in verse 8, and he says, "Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also?" Verse 9, "For it is written in the law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.' Is it oxen God is concerned about? Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope." Paul says, in verse 8, "Look, this is more than reasonable" (which is what verse 7 was in his giving of appropriate illustrations). "This is more than just common sense. This is supported by God's Word. This is something we can latch onto because God has said so. I'm not speaking as a mere man," he says. And then he goes out of his way, and he quotes in verses 9 and 10 out of Deuteronomy 25:4, where he just says, "If the ox is plowing out the grain, if he's hungry, let him eat what he's been working on." And then he sarcastically says (because I love the sarcasm), "You think He meant that just for the ox?" "Well, no. The ox can't read." "Okay. No, He meant it for us. He wrote this for us, for our sakes, so that we can learn the principle." Look, God always takes care of the animals. Job 38:41, He provides the ravens with food. Matthew 10:29-31, He goes to the funeral of every sparrow (or He's aware of it). He clothes the grass in the field as a banquet for the fowls of the air. So He tells the farmer to let the ox who's treating out the corn, "Eat." "But it isn't just written for the oxen," Paul said. "It's written as a principle of God with far greater application." And so, in verse 10, Paul says it. "This is for our sakes." Paul applies this principle that those who labor should be able to labor in the hope of the fruit in which they share, that they might continue to do that work, and plow and thresh and hope, and be allowed to share in the rewards that come from their faithful service. And for Paul, his point was, "Look, I planted the church there. I was there for a year and a half. You haven't supported me at all. In fact, a lot of you turned on me for no good reason." But he wants to teach them that he's been hearing about this liberty and the difficulty that they'd been facing.

So he says, in verse 11, he makes the application, “If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things?” So Paul applies the principle to spiritual laborers, in his case the minister who had brought great blessings and had been faithful, and God had used his faithfulness and brought fruit. And he used it by comparison, “Is it a small thing to have these folks that serve the Lord financially supported from the fruit of the ministry that they had been given?” Now all he wants them to do is come to the conclusion that, no, that’s not unfair, that’s not unreasonable; that’s proper in every way. So that he can say, “Yeah, and I didn’t ask for it.” Because the lesson is the same as chapter 8. He wants you to get chapter 8 and chapter 9. But this is his...you know, he’s a good arguer. So he applies it to the laborers. Paul was the last guy in ministry who was into it for what he could get out of it.

You know, when he stood – later, when he was going back towards Jerusalem, and he stopped by Miletus, 30 miles or so off the coast and visited one last time with the Ephesian elders (Acts 20), where he had spent three years and from where he had written this letter – he said, “I want you to remember that I have never coveted any of your silver or gold or clothing, and you yourselves know these things – that I’ve worked with my own hands to provide for my necessities and for those who are with me. And in every way laboring, I wanted to show you how to support the weak.” In other words, “Look at my example. Remember the words of Jesus, ‘It’s more blessed to give than to receive.’ ” Now that’s the words of Jesus that Paul remembered. It’s not written anywhere in your gospel, but we get further information from Paul. But he was able to leave Ephesus after three years doing a lot of other things, coming back through, and he warned them about the danger the church was in, the false prophets that would rise from within and come from without. He said, “I’ve given you the whole Word of God. I haven’t held anything back.” And he said, “I want you to remember how I served you. Not for self-benefit, not for gain, but simply to just be sure that the Lord is honored.”

His point is the recognition of his rights versus the use of them – if they hinder your work in the Lord or stumble anybody else. That’s all he’s interested in. You could walk away with that xxxxx. You’d be fine. Paul spoke of that spiritual indebtedness when writing to the Romans about the gifts other Gentile churches were sending along with them to the poor. In fact, he wrote in chapter 15:25-27 of Romans, “I’m going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints. It pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make certain contributions for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. It pleased them, indeed, because they are debtors. If the Gentiles had been partakers of their spiritual fruits, their duty is also to minister to them in material things.” Paul used the same argument. We have a bunch of Gentile churches bringing money to the poor in Jerusalem to try to smooth the divide between the “grace only” and the “you’ve-go-to-become-a-Jew-first” early church. And Paul said, “The Gentiles understand they’re in debt to the Jews. They brought the Messiah. They brought the Word of God. We learned, we got saved. It’s a small thing now to repay or feel obligated to help and to support them,” if you will. Paul would write to the Galatians, in chapter 6:6, “Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches.” So there was, certainly, an expectation on Paul’s part – as an apostle who had spent years in ministry – that he could find support

for and help from those he is serving. Paul would write to Timothy, when he took over the Ephesian church later, in chapter 5:17 – the first letter that he wrote to him, that “the elders who rule well should be counted of double honor, especially those who labor in the Word and in doctrine.” And the word “honor” there is the word for finance. So Paul wanted to be sure that those who gave themselves to the teaching of God’s Word would be well cared for.

We have been a church almost forty years. We’ll be forty years in April. April 21st is our 40-year anniversary. April 20th is Easter. So we’ll have a good celebration. In fact, that following week we’re going to feed all of you for dinner. We’re going to have a big dinner night, okay, to celebrate forty years of God’s faithfulness. (Applause) Is that for dinner or what? What is that for? You like me, don’t you? Now. (Laughing)

We have 20+ people that work at the church here full time; most of them full time, not all. We feel an obligation to pay them as well as we can for their service and labor in the Lord. It’s a privilege to work in a ministry. It is a responsibility. And, at least from my standpoint, I think we have a responsibility to pay our employees well enough to where they’ll never think about stealing but never lose track of the Lord’s provision. So, all of our supported families here get medical insurance, dental insurance, eyeglasses, retirement for the pastors (we contribute for them so they are here thirty or forty years, they’ll be fine). We want to bless those who bless us. Now that wasn’t always true. When we started the church back in 1985, there wasn’t enough money to pay anybody. In fact, I ended up working here for four and a half years for \$200 a week while my wife went to work full time. But I’ll tell you our pastors work hard, and we appreciate them very much. And Paul feels the same way. So we are comfortable with that.

Now, this is Paul’s argument (like I said, and I’ve tried to keep you in the context) just so that he can teach what chapter 8 taught, especially verse 9 of chapter 8, “Be careful lest your liberty becomes a stumbling block to those who are weak.”

Verse 12, “If others are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more? Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ.” Apparently the Corinthian church was supporting others, others who had contributed far less to the church than Paul had. The people that have been mentioned – Apollos was there to pastor, Peter was there to minister – Paul felt, as the founder of the church, that he had a reasonable expectation of support, maybe greater than those who followed him. But notice he says, in verse 12, “Although I had a right from the standpoint of experience, from the standpoint of common sense, even from the standpoint of a biblical mandate,” he refused to pursue it; rather choosing to make it on his own if it meant, for one minute, he would hinder the gospel of Jesus by demanding his rights. He’s not arguing that he has a right; he’s just saying, “Is it always right to demand your rights?” It’s a good question. When Paul said, “I’ve chosen,” verse 12, “to just endure it, we endure all things.....” The word “stego” is a Greek word that means to put your hand over your mouth or to stand by silently. It is a present tense verb, at least in the context here, which would suggest to that very moment Paul would do whatever it takes to make the ministry work without their support, even though he had every right to

it because the big lesson is: when your liberty becomes a liability, it is no longer a liberty you can use. And that's his point. Paul, in fact, went on most of the time to support himself.

We have a conviction, and I have, as a senior pastor, the conviction we should never ask for money, and so we never have. If God isn't big enough to pay His bills, we've got to change Gods, not try to beat the sheep for money. God provides. He always has. Everything we have here is paid for. The Lord has been good to the church. I think that what has hindered the gospel for us more is the blasphemous greed and flamboyant lifestyle of these television evangelists who merchandise the gospel. And when you share the gospel with somebody, invariably they'll bring up one of these goofballs, these clowns who parade around as if they know the Lord, and we have a difficult time.

Paul would rather win the lost and lose the privilege. Does that make sense? Win the lost, lose the privilege. He said the same thing in lawsuits back in chapter 6. He said, "Wouldn't you just rather take the loss, gain the heart, gain the soul?" That's true for us as well. I hope you will never leave here thinking the church is just after your money. Go give it somewhere else. God'll take care of the church; He always has, and we're so thankful for it.

If you read through the gospels, you can find Paul working with his own hands almost everywhere, and he does so not only to support himself but his whole team. In chapter 4:12 of this book, "We labor together with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; and when we are persecuted, we endure. We're just going to stick with this. This is our calling." We are told in Acts 18, when he arrived in Corinth, that he met some folks who were in the same trade. And so, during the week, he made tents; on the weekend, on the Sabbath, he went to the synagogue and sought to share. And by the time his friends arrived, oh, then the Lord began to open many more doors. He said, as I read to you in Acts 20:33 from the Ephesian elders meeting there in Miletus, "I haven't coveted anybody's stuff." He wrote to the Thessalonians in chapter 2 (1 Thessalonians 2:9), "Remember, brethren, our labor and our toil day and night, that we might not be a burden to any of you as we preach the gospel." We don't want that to be an issue. We want you to know the Lord.

Verse 13, "Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel." So, there's this Old Testament (kind of) principle and New Testament parallel that are kind of mentioned in two concurrent verses. If you go to the Old Testament, the priests were entitled to share of the very sacrifices that the LORD required of the people to bring. In fact, in the Promised Land, the Levites (the priests) were given no land of their own. They were given cities amongst the people that they supported and served, and they were supported there by the offerings of the people for their spiritual service. When Jesus, there in Matthew 10, sent the twelve apostles to go out and to minister, He told them they were to find a place that the door was open, where people would welcome them and greet them; and that when they were greeted, they should just stay

there. “Don’t look for a better deal, don’t look for better food. The Lord has opened a door for you to minister; stay with them. If they don’t want to house you or take care of you, rub the dust off your feet and keep movin’.” When He sent the seventy out, in Luke 10, He said, “Stay in the same house eating and drinking, for the laborer is worthy of his wages. But don’t go huntin’ for a better deal. Just be faithful to what God has given you to do.” But it all applies to this issue of provision. Even if you read Luke 8, you’ll read about all the women that hung out with Jesus, that came from the Galilee, and many there who provided for Him from their substance. So the Lord even practiced that in terms of being cared for by those who He was ministering to.

So, Paul makes the argument, verse 15, “But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void.” That’s a big statement, isn’t it? For Paul, to ruin the ministry that he had, to turn away people from the gospel, to stumble the Christians, even though he had an absolute right to expect help, he said, “I’d rather die.” There’s a guy you can follow. He makes the argument he has a right to support as an apostle. He’s an apostle, common sense, God’s law, others receive it, why can’t we? There’s an Old Testament principle, there’s a New Testament practice. Jesus lived by it. But yet, chapter 8:9, “I don’t want to stumble anybody. It isn’t that valuable to me.” So Paul says he would rather die than ruin his ability to boast of financial independence and the declaration of the free gospel of Jesus Christ.

It’s interesting when we sought to buy this building, there were some churches that offered to lend us money. And we decided, as a church, if the Lord wasn’t going to give it to us, we weren’t going to take it. Something about debt and the church is not a good thing. It’s not even good in your life, is it? So we decided we would not go in debt if the Lord wouldn’t provide. And He did. And, as a result, we were able to come in and buy the place, and we were able to brag a lot about the Lord.

The books that I have written – and I think I’ve mentioned to you before – all of them belong to the church. I could have kept them to myself, probably made a lot of money selling them across the country. But I don’t really care. I wrote them here. I was being paid while I worked. They belong to you, not to me. They belong to the Lord’s people. And so I can hock them brazenly. “Hey, get my book, man!” Nobody can accuse me of anything because they don’t belong to me. I like that better, actually.

When Abraham returned from rescuing the people of Lot (Genesis 14) – and you might remember that the king of Sodom, as he (Abraham) came back not only with Lot but also the people of Sodom, that the king of Sodom offered spoils to Abraham as payment. “I’ll just give you whatever you want. Take whatever you want.” And Abraham said to the king of Sodom, “If I could just have the people that I came to rescue, you can keep the goods.” And he said to Sodom, “I’ve raised my hand to the LORD God, the Most High. He’s the Possessor of heaven and earth, and I will take nothing. Not a thread from a sandal strap. I will not take anything that is yours lest you say ‘I’ve made Abraham rich.’ I don’t need anything. God has been good.” That’s a great place to be, isn’t it?

And Paul wants to be that fellow who can say the same thing. He waived his rights for the glory of God to remain intact.

Verse 16, “For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship. What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel.” I want you to notice the comparison here because up to this point, Paul has been saying, “I have a right. I have a right. I’m going to set it aside, but I have a right.” And then you get to verse 16, and Paul says of his ministry of preaching, “I can’t really boast about that because I have little choice. The calling of God upon my life demands that I respond. I could choose to preach and be faithful to God’s calling and be rewarded for my obedience, or out of a compulsion of God upon my life, I can just go preach, and there’ll be no reward. But I really don’t have a choice in this matter.” That’s really what verse 16 says. “I don’t have a choice. I can do willingly,” verse 17 or, “I can do against my will, and then I just have a responsibility, a stewardship. But either way I have no choice with this. I have to preach. That’s my calling. So what is my reward, then? I can choose to preach freely. I can choose to deny what my calling and stewardship would allow me to ask as a right. I have the freedom to say no to that. I have no freedom to say no to God’s calling, but I have absolute freedom to say, ‘Yes, Lord, I will set aside my rights and my demands,’ if you will, ‘for Your glory.’” Paul saw himself as a vessel that God would use either way, but Paul said, “Woe is me if I don’t yield.”

I thought about that. You know, Balaam (back in the Old Testament) had a compulsion, albeit unwillingly (according to Numbers 23 and 24), to hire himself out to the king of Moab, who really wanted to curse these incoming several million Jews wandering across his land. You probably know the story of how the LORD sought to warn Balaam away. But Balaam liked the offer of the cash, the incentive that the king of Moab was offering. So every time he opened his mouth, rather than cursing them, God stepped in, and he blessed the children of Israel. And it happened four times, and this from a false prophet. God had the last word. But God had a message, and He was going to get it out. Was it willing? Not on Balaam’s part. And Paul kind of uses that same comparison.

Jonah eventually felt the, “Woe is me if I don’t preach.” So did Ezekiel in chapter 3:17-18, “If I don’t warn them of their sin, they’re going to die in their sins, but their blood I will require at your hand.” And Ezekiel said, “I get it. I get it. I understand.” Peter and John were able to say to the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:18-20), “We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. You tell us not to preach in Jesus’ name; we have no choice. We have to preach.” Paul said to Archippus, when he wrote his Colossian letter (4:17), “Take heed to the ministry which you have received from the Lord. Make sure that you fulfill it.”

So Paul ends this section by saying, “I really can’t do anything about my preaching. I can do it willingly or not, but that’s God’s call. But I have a choice in this idea of rights, and my choice is to set those rights aside.”

So verse 18, the reward was not the preaching that was the calling and the work of God in which he had little choice. But the freedom to do freely without demanding his rights of support, that he was allowed and could do.

You remember the heart of Elisha after the LORD miraculously healed Naaman, the leper? (2 Kings 5) And he was so excited, he came back to offer Elisha a financial reward. “I’ll give you whatever you want.” And Elisha didn’t want anything because it was the LORD’s work. But his servant, Gehazi, ran after him and conned him out of a couple talents of silver, got a couple of suits from him, too, I think. Well it says changes of raiment. I’m pretty sure those are suits, three-piece suits, I’m pretty sure. But they didn’t last very long because by the time Elisha found out about it, the LORD smote this guy, Gehazi, with the leprosy that Naaman had been delivered from.

Paul, like Elisha, wanted all to know that salvation was free, that he couldn’t be bought or sold, and that by denying his rights of support – even if it was at personal cost to himself – it was worth the fruit that comes on the other side. And I think that’s always the case.

Do you have rights? Sure. Lots of them. But would you press them to the point where someone won’t listen to the gospel from you as a result? So the example of Paul in limiting his rights and liberties for the sake of the gospel is really the argument of the first eighteen verses.

The next verses are a little more exciting as well. I hope you’ll read down to verse 27. I don’t know if we’ll stop there or not, but let’s make a plan to at least finish the chapter next week. Shall we pray?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
August 25, 2024