

“Your Freedom is Not the Issue – Advancing the Gospel is”

1 Corinthians 9:1-14

The Corinthians had sent Paul a letter we no longer have, concerning some questions about living out their faith. In Ch. 8 the Corinthians asked Paul about whether Christians should eat food sacrificed to idols or not. Some understood that since idols didn't really exist the food wasn't actually sacrificed to a pagan god. But not everyone felt that way. Paul's answer was that exercising your freedom to eat or not to eat is not the issue. The real issue was how are you using your Christian knowledge 'to build others up in love'? Even though you feel you are free to practice something that some Christians struggle to practice, will you give up your right to that freedom in order not to hinder your fellow believer's spiritual walk?

While Ch. 9 sounds like Paul is now addressing something else, he still is and tackles it from another angle, using his own sacrifice of his freedom for the sake of their spiritual progress. As we learned last time, the more theological knowledge we have the more loving we should be to each other. Because knowledge can cause two kinds of growth;

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

Am I using my knowledge of Scripture to puff myself up or build others up? This is the challenge for all of us. The Corinthians lived at a time when knowledge was the goal. The street corners, markets and theatres were filled with people giving speeches about philosophies and ideas. When Paul arrived in Athens sharing the gospel in Acts 17, we read in v. 18

¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.” ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

We've already seen how the Corinthian church was divided about personal preferences for their favourite bible teacher (mostly Paul vs. Apollos or Peter) but they were also divided over social class, head coverings, spiritual gifts and other things I'm sure. Sadly, like we do too, the things we disagree over we use as signs of our spiritual maturity. Paul is very frustrated by this attitude in the churches.

Here in Ch. 9 he shows how he modeled giving up his right [not even a preference] to be supported by them so that they wouldn't be burdened in any way freeing Paul to share the gospel and disciple them in Christ. For almost two years he did this. Why did he do this? To model that the right to practice our preferences should be take a back seat if it will cause a fellow brother or sister in Christ to stumble?

Be Concerned More for Other's Spiritual Growth than Your Rights (9:1-2)

In this chapter, Paul gives an example of what he means to give up your freedom if you don't have any problem eating food used for pagan worship, for the sake of a believer who still thinks you should not. And this principle applies today to all those preferences we disagree on spiritually (that are not clearly defined in Scripture) or culturally that we may need to limit ourselves to based on love for others. Except Paul's example was more than a preference; it actually was something he was entitled too – not asking for financial support for all the ministry he provided for them. He did this because he believed it may have hindered his ministry among them. So he asks a number of rhetorical questions:

Am I not free? [yes, Paul was just as free to practice his rights and preferences as much as they] Am I not an apostle? [of course] Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? ² Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

Some Corinthians were questioning Paul's apostleship yet Paul clearly tells them 'I meet those qualifications and, on top of that, the very existence of the Corinthian church is a testimony to my ministry among you.' A seal was an image burned in wax left by the owner's ring. Essentially Paul said 'when people see your lives changed for Christ, they see my stamp all over you.'

What's Paul's point? He had every right to have asked them for support – and he'll give numerous reasons why in a second – but he chose not to out of love for them. He felt asking for support might cause someone to stumble so he limited his freedoms, rights and preferences and looked after his own support with his tent-making and mending trade. Which would have taken up more time for Paul.

Set aside your preference or freedom to have a different view on a non-essential spiritual matter than another believer for the sake of their spiritual maturing. Sometimes we get so caught up in our opinion over a spiritual disagreement that God doesn't give us clear-cut direction on, and then make it an issue of fellowship between us and another believer. Paul says, be loving. Let your knowledge deepen your love, not divide over.

As Paul gives more evidence of his personal example of limiting insisting on his right to support he shows us

When We Focus on Our Rights We Lose Focus on Our Purpose (9:3-12)

³ This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. ⁴ Don't we have the right to food and drink? ⁵ Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? ⁶ Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? ⁷ Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? ⁸ Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing?

Receiving support for the work of ministry is a natural expectation. And not just yourself, your family. Paul didn't have a wife or, some have felt he had a wife and she passed. But he mentioned Peter and Jesus' step-brothers James and Jude most likely; they all have wives who accompany them and they are supported by those who benefit from their ministry. Yet Paul and Barnabas often chose to support themselves; not that Paul didn't receive support at times – he did and thanked

people when he did. But his point here is it is a universal principle that one is rewarded for their work or ministry.

A soldier doesn't pay for his own gear and food to fight for his country. A farmer is expected to eat his own produce and drink the milk his cows produce. That's natural. And then he's going to show them it's a biblical principle too. Receiving support is a way of being thanked. It's encouraging. And we can broaden the application of what Paul's saying in that if we do a good job at work, at home or in ministry we should receive a benefit from that. We should at the very least be thanked for what we did. Paul said I have the right to be thanked by you in different ways but we weren't. And this is something we need to all know;

We should all be thanked for our ministry; but we may not (vv.3-8)

There are many different ways we indirectly say thanks. Showing up is a huge one. Thank you for being here today. You came to want to worship, fellowship, and be built up in your walk with God. It's encouraging to those who serve to have people to serve. If you host an event at your home, you get it ready for people to come and when so few do it's disappointing. I know we should be thankful for whoever comes but we can't help but be discouraged when few come.

Being engaged is a way of indirectly saying thanks. No one brought their pillow and blanket with them this morning, curled with a good book, had a little snooze, or played sudoku on their phone [I hope!]. I pray many of you came to encourage someone today; to serve and not be served.

But if you've been in church long enough you know that sometimes you serve and spend a lot of time in preparation and taught junior church or rearranged your schedule so other people could come to a meeting or prepared a snack and very few people said thank you. Understand it happens, so don't serve for the wrong reason, to be thanked by people. Because we've all heard people say 'No one appreciates what I do, why should I bother.' Yes, we should be more sensitive and thank people when they serve, but it doesn't always happen. Don't do it for that reason. You've lost focus of who you're serving and what you're really doing it for; so people will be built up in the Lord.

Paul was saying, you Corinthians may not be very supportive of what we did but, we don't serve for that reason, we're here because God wants us here and we're doing it for His glory.

⁹For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. ¹¹If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?

God didn't put Deut. 25:4 in the bible for oxen to read and know that they have the right not to be muzzled when threshing grain! A muzzled ox threshing all that grain would get very frustrated. And v.10 moves things towards the spiritual application of reaping and sowing. Paul points out the principle of God rewarding our work by His working in people's lives as the reward. And shouldn't the workers at least be thanked for it, Paul says, yet he didn't ask for it because that's not his focus. He did not want to hinder the gospel.

We are human and we need encouragement so Paul is

Reminding believers to thank others for their ministry (vv.9-11)

A lot of things are done behind the scenes that we only notice if it's broken, messy, or missing. We wouldn't be happy if we walked into a dirty bathroom – thank you to those who clean the church, We would be a little frustrated if we when we went to take communion the bread and the cup were missing – thank you to the mystery people who did that! Parents would be upset if no one was in the nursery or jr. church when they went to take their child out. And on and on we could go. We should make it our goal to come to serve people and not just be served when we come together. Can I challenge you to intentionally come to church to thank someone for who they are or what they did or you were encouraged because of their ministry? And then they can say, thank you Lord for helping me serve others so that the gospel is not hindered.

The work of the gospel is not just evangelism. The gospel continues to work in you and me because I need Jesus' forgiveness and grace everyday if I'm to grow spiritually. I need to be reminded that everyone enjoys the same grace, none of us are better than anyone else. I need to show that same gospel grace to everyone every day. Because we can get all get off focus when our preferences or rights get ignored and forget why we're here as God's people. And this is where Paul goes next in vv.12-14

Be Willing to Let Go of Your Rights So that The Gospel Advances (9:12-14)

¹² If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ .

Paul points out that they supported others like Apollos and Peter and whoever else had ministered to them but he did not demand this from them. And when he says 'we put up with anything' he meant it. Working with the Corinthians was not easy. They were an immature, divisive bunch. Paul didn't demand his rights to be thanked, instead he

Trusted God for commendations so he can be glorified (v.12)

He did not want to hinder the gospel of Christ. He wanted to see people's lives changed by the gospel and continually changing because of the gospel working through them once saved. In Ch. 10:31, still in this context of eating meat and drinking wine sacrificed to idols, he'll say *So whether you eat and drink [or not eat and drink] or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble.*

Set aside your preferences, your opinions and even your rights if it might hinder the work of the gospel in another believer's life. Focus on glorifying God. Make sure you both glorify God. Don't divide over an issue, unite over the Lord first and foremost. God will reward us in His time and in His way.

¹³ Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.

Serving God brings far more blessings than anything else (vv.13-14)

While at first Paul just seems to be reminding us again that the Bible points out that God's servants are to receive support from their ministry, it's not simply "support", it's a blessing. All of us receive so many blessings from being involved in ministry. Look at all the friends you've made –

around the world – because you're a believer and gotten to know people through serving. Think of the different places you've been to, again because you're a believer in Christ and you would have never gone there was it not for the gospel or because of people you've met.

Think of all the support you have given out of your income towards churches and ministries over the years, trusting God to meet your needs as you've been prompted to meet the needs of His people around the world. And you're doing more than fine. You're blessed even though you gave so much away.

Paul's been using himself as an example of limiting our liberty and preferences out of love for others and the sake of the gospel. Paul did that because Jesus did that. Jesus who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. On the cross when people taunted Him to come down and save Himself, He did not. When they spat at Him and beat Him He prayed God to forgive them. He gave up His right as the Son of God for the sake of the gospel and love for us and purposely died on the cross. Knowing He was in the Father's hands and the future reward of resurrection hope was waiting for Him. A far greater reward than anything He would get from anything on earth.

Thank people for ministry. Thank God for the people who have blessed you. Thank God for the blessings you've received because you're a follower of Jesus. But thank God most of all that even if you don't get thanked down here the future reward of resurrection hope is waiting for you.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please
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