

Parson to Person
1 Corinthians 9
(Paul: A Great Example)

“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? 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.

My defense to those who examine me is this: 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, and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working? 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? Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also? 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. If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? 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. 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. 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. 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. For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore, I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9).

A Missionary Calling

Paul has called the Corinthians (and all believer) to live an unselfish (others-centered) life. Moreover, he himself lived such a life and therefore had every reason to call others to the same. His authority herein is noted in particular when he said, *“Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ”* (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Illustrated Self Sacrifice

Paul used himself as an illustration of self-sacrificial service. Herein we learn that he willingly forfeited times of eating and drinking, marriage, and financial support (from the Corinthians) in order to remove any stumbling block from the path he was taking with them. His desire to get the message of the Gospel to the Corinthians (and others) without the potential distractions was paramount to him. Paul wrote, *“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. 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”* (1 Corinthians 9:15–17), and, *“Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified”* (1 Corinthians 9:26–27).

Paul did not want to be *“disqualified”* in the eyes of the Corinthians and therefore laid aside his rights and prerogatives in order to serve them.

He did have rights. He said, *“If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? 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.”* (1 Corinthians 9:11–12). Moreover, he taught them that *“the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel”* (1 Corinthians 9:14), but as a missionary he desired to serve the people without “taxation.”

The Carnality of the Corinthians

This is an odd insight into the nature of the Corinthian believers. As rich and affluent (fully able to give Paul support), their idolatry of *“mammon”* (see Matthew 6:24) may have gotten in the way of their initial reception of the Gospel. In fact, this is true for many immature believers today. I have seen and heard “baby Christians” leave the church when they hear anything at all about financial support for the ministry.

Time to Grow

Believers should grow out of infancy and invest in the Gospel. However, missionaries generally gain their support from the mature and not those they seek to evangelize. Paul knew this and later said, *“Did I commit sin in humbling myself that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you free of charge?”* (2 Corinthians 11:7).

The illustrations Paul gave were pointed at loving others and setting one’s self aside for the sake of the Gospel. Paul did receive

financial support from other churches (the Philippians for example—the whole letter to the Philippians was a thank you letter). He did eat meat (when keeping Passover, etc.), likely consumed wine, and certainly instructed Timothy to *“use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities.”* Moreover, Paul encouraged financial support for the ministry when writing, *“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? Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also? 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. If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things?”* (1 Corinthians 9:7–11), but set these things aside for the sake of these immature and carnal people in order to help them come to know the Lord—and grow into mature believers.

As we learn from these lessons, may we all grow to understand the freedom we have in Jesus but also with recognition of our call to serve.

I love you all,
Pastor Paul