

## 1 Corinthians 9

### Introduction

In answer to the Corinthians questions about meat offered to idols, Paul had replied that the stronger and more mature Christians ought to deny themselves in the interests of the weaker brother. Now Paul shows that he is doing what he has asked others to do. He has rights as a Christian apostle and preacher. But he is prepared to forego them in certain circumstances. He mentions four specific aspects of Christian service in this chapter, and we have much to learn from them, once we get behind the first century shell to the real point Paul is making.

#### Rights of Christian service he is prepared to forego in the interests of the gospel

Paul is clear that as someone in Christian work, he has certain rights which the churches should honour. Despite what others thought, he was truly an apostle. He had seen the Lord, and so he was an apostle. God's seal of blessing was on his ministry. The foundation of the church in Corinth was proof of that. He was a genuine apostle and servant of the Lord. Hence he had certain rights. He had the right to eat and drink and be cared for at the church's expense. He had the right to travel with a wife, as Peter and the Lord's brothers did, and other apostles. He had been called to spend his whole life in evangelism and preaching, and therefore he had the right to expect the churches to give him maintenance for food, clothing and expenses.

This lesson is taught everywhere. If a man is a soldier, he does not have to keep himself – that is the army's job. A farmer should enjoy the fruits of his labours in the garden or field; he does not have to buy his own food from the market. A herdsman is entitled to help himself to milk from the flock. Even oxen treading out corn are not to be muzzled, but allowed to eat of it. The priests in the Temple could keep part of the sacrifices for their own meals.

Then the climax of the argument – the Lord has ordained that those who preach the Gospel live the Gospel. **If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more** (1 Corinthians 9:12). In our terms, if a man gives up an occupation or job which brought in money so that he can minister full-time to a church, he has every right to expect that church to support him financially.

But Paul was quite willing to be a tentmaker and do a bit of work to maintain himself if it was right to do so. He did it while he was at Ephesus (Acts 20:33ff) and Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 2:9). Sometimes he did this because he did not want to be a burden on the church, because they themselves were very poor and would find it hard to support him. Or sometimes his reason was that he did not want to be accused by his enemies of being in it for the money (2 Thessalonians 3:7-9). But if taking support from others would hinder the work or cause problem to others, he gave up his rights, and did the job for nothing.

The person in the ministry or the missionary who has given up a job to support self can expect maintenance because of the service he renders to the church. This does not

give him the right to live in luxury or to bleed the church white or squeeze the last penny out of them. But neither ought he to be kept on the breadline, deprived of basic necessities. So the church's giving ought to be systematic and conscientious. Not an act of charity which we can withdraw when things get tight. We do not pay the supermarket or the electricity bill just when we have the cash to spare. The butcher would not accept a "God bless you and take care of you, brother" in lieu of cash. Neither should the pastor or missionary be given that.

But at the same time, the Christian worker ought to be prepared to forego his rights in extreme circumstances, and still serve in the way he has been called. This may mean he has to get a secular job to support himself in order to remain where God wants him. The reason he is in Christian work is because he cannot help it – he has been constrained by God.

#### Sense of compulsion which controls him

Necessity was laid upon me. **Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel** (1 Corinthians 9:16). He feels compelled to preach. God has left him no option. He has no choice. The Living Bible here says, "I couldn't stop preaching if I wanted to – I would be utterly miserable. Woe unto me if I don't." It is not unknown to see texts in the pulpit, like "Sir, we would see Jesus", or "Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel", to remind the preacher what he is there for.

This constraint applies not just to preaching but also to any particular form of Christian service. There is a sense of constraint and necessity. What is a call? A sense of constraint. The word of God become fire in the bones. Cannot help self. It is possible to be conscientious in non-Christian work, but for our heart to not be in it, not truly happy in it. But this situation cannot exist in Christian work.

Advice often given to men wanting to go into the ministry (also used about missionary work too) – "Don't do it if you can help it." But if, for all the wealth of the Indies, you feel you could do no other, then, if you have the gifts, you are certainly called. The preacher truly called ought to feel a Sunday not preaching is a Sunday wasted. (And that, not because he likes the sound of his own voice or because he thinks he is the greatest. Most preachers hate to hear themselves preach.)

Men who use every opportunity to get out of a preaching engagement, or who are wondering what they are in the ministry for, have lost their sense of direction. A preacher may be depressed, or criticized, or discouraged – but still must preach. It is his life. This sense of constraint is essential for an effective ministry. Only that sense of compulsion will keep us going when we receive blow on blow. Men who enter the ministry because they are exhibitionists, like the sound of their own voice, want honour and respect, or see it as an easy means of earning a living, will only be able to carry on like that for a few years. But they will not be able to sustain it when they feel the scorn of the world, or middle years mocking. Cannot keep going with real devotion unless he knows "I was called."

#### Willing to identify self with those to whom he ministered

No limits to which Paul would not go to adapt himself to reach others. He became like a Jew to win Jews. He became like a Gentile to win Gentiles. **I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some** (1 Corinthians 9:22). He was prepared for any sacrifice and adjustment for the Gospel. As long as no principle was involved, he would do anything to become one of those to whom he ministered.

He would not have anything to do with circumcision if there was a suggestion that it was necessary for salvation. But when that was not the issue, he was prepared to circumcise Timothy (Acts 16:3) to make him more acceptable to the Jews. He was prepared to take Jewish vow in the Temple to disarm criticism (Acts 21:20-26). So when preaching to Jewish audiences, he kept the Jewish law and ceremonial. When preaching to Gentiles in Athens, he quoted two Greek poets, Epimenidas and Aratus. He spoke of Christians as a citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20). He humbly accommodated himself, shared others interests, in order to get alongside them. C.f. Hudson Taylor who wore Chinese dress at all times, and ate with chopsticks and learnt native cookery.

This does not mean Paul joined them in their sins, and agreed with their outlook on various matters, so that he was one with them in every way. The world expects us to be different. People have no respect whatsoever if we are no different. They expect a higher standard from the Christian, especially the Christian minister. But where Christian principle and wrongdoing is not involved, we must identify with others in their interests and practices. No suggestion of being standoffish and unnecessarily awkward and superior.

#### Practice of stern self-discipline

Here is Paul practicing what he preached in the last part of the chapter, in his talk about racing, prizes, training, boxing and discipline. The Isthonian Games were held every four years at Corinth (second only to the Olympic Games). Foot racing was a favourite sport. Many competed. There was only one prize. Training was long and hard, often went on for ten months. All that to win a corruptible crown made of myrtle or pine.

How much more does the Christian go into training. He learns the stern art of self-discipline and self-control. His prize is the crown of righteousness which does not fade away, but has eternal worth.

Then Paul uses the figure of a boxer. This was a savage art in Paul's day. No padded gloves. Around the wrists were padded thongs studded with metal knobs. Not a pleasant experience to come in contact with that. Often the defeated boxer was killed in the arena, or else he became the victor's slave.

Paul gave his body a knock out blow to bring it into subjection. He beat his body "black and blue" (James Moffat's translation). The body is a good servant but a bad master. Paul's readers knew what it was to be ruled by the body – they were gluttons, drunkards, sexually promiscuous, and what their body had craved they had given it. Their appetites, instincts, desires and lusts had once had free rein.

**So that I myself will not be disqualified for the prize** (1 Corinthians 9:27). αδοκιμος is a reference to athlete who failed in the contest because he was inadequately prepared or broke the rules. The A.V.'s "castaway" is misleading. This term has led people to fear, and indeed teach, that you can be lost after being saved. There is no reference to eternal loss. Paul's concern is not that he would lose his salvation, but that he would lose his crown and reward through failing to satisfy the Lord.

Our work will be tested one day for quality of service (1 Corinthians 3:15). If it passes the test, we will receive a reward. If it is burned up as useless, we will suffer loss, though we are still saved, as a man escaping through flames, losing all possessions. If we are going to be our best for God, the body and physical side is to be kept in its place. It must not rule us. C.f. One aspect of the fruit of the spirit is self-control.

### Conclusion

This is a rich and very full passage. It contains very important statements about Christian service. The immediate reference is to Paul the Apostle. But the principles are enduring. In Christian service, a man's rights, e.g. to support and maintenance, should be expected, but at times may have to be set aside, and he must still carry on with the work. If he is truly called, he is under constraint, and he has no option. He must be willing to adapt himself to others if principle is not involved. But there must be self-discipline and self-control.

These points are diffuse, but they are all aspects of Christian work. The application to the individual is "What is the Lord saying about my life? Will I obey?"