

1 Corinthians 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] 1 Corinthians chapter 9 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. This is my defence 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 and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?
- 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? Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the law say the same?
- For it is written in the law of Moses, He shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain. Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake?
- [0 : 5 9] It was written for our sake, because the ploughman should plough in hope, and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. 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.
- 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? In the same way the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.
- 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.
- 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.
- [2 : 0 0] But if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. 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.
- For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 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. 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.

[3 : 10] 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. Starting 1 Corinthians chapter 9, we seem to be engaging in a strange digression from Paul's argument.

Paul seems to be moving into a completely unrelated subject. One moment he is talking about idle food, the next he is talking about his rights as an apostle. Perhaps, however, we do not notice this shift.

We may be so used to breaking Paul up into verses and chapters that we don't think about the larger flow of his arguments. But it does matter at points like this. Paul has not left his point behind.

He is approaching it indirectly through his own experience. And the point of this chapter is to raise a secondary issue, the question of his rights and support as an apostle, and then using that to address a primary issue.

The issue of idle food is still very much the issue here. It's the point. And it will remain the issue right through the whole of chapter 10. The main point of this chapter is not to defend Paul, but to exhort the Corinthians to learn from Paul's practice in regard to financial support, and to bring that to bear upon their relation to the issue of idle food.

[4 : 24] The previous chapter had ended with a striking claim. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. And one can imagine people reacting against this claim.

Our reaction is against this claim. Why should our rights be held hostage by other people in such a manner? The natural response, then, is to insist upon our freedom, our right to eat what we want, and not to compromise that for anyone else.

Our rights are our rights. Paul lists at this point a number of his credentials as an apostle. He's seen the risen Christ. He's founded the Corinthian church. And the Corinthians should be the first to recognize his apostolic claim, since they are the direct beneficiaries of his ministry.

Paul, of all people, as an apostle, should be free. And he makes a deft rhetorical move here. Does he not have the right to eat and drink as a free apostle? This relates what he's saying to the argument of chapter 8, but also relates to the question that he raises in this chapter about his support in his ministry.

He has to make his living. He has to eat and drink. And he needs the money to do so. Behind Paul's use of rights language here is verse 9 of the preceding chapter. The issue in the preceding chapter was the Corinthians' rights.

[5 : 45] And now Paul talks about his own rights, and how he has exercised those rights in his dealings with them. The other apostles are supported in a way that enables them to take wives with them.

Paul is unmarried, and has to work for his own support, like Barnabas. He presents a series of analogies that show the strangeness of this situation. It's like the soldier fighting on his own expense, or the vineyard planter who can't taste the fruit of his vineyard, or the shepherd that cannot enjoy the milk of the flock.

Beyond these analogies, the law itself presents the principle of not muzzling the ox as it treads out the grain. And Paul makes clear here that this is a symbolic commandment. In Deuteronomy chapter 25, it's related to the right of the man performing the lever at marriage to enjoy the use of his dead brother's property while he is raising up seed for him.

It's also connected with those working in the temple. And maybe we should see some connection here. Those working in the temple were working on a site that had been built upon the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.

And the priests, of course, were symbolically connected with oxen in the sacrifices. They were the oxen working on the threshing floor, and they were entitled to eat of the sacrifices that were offered there.

[7 : 00] As they prepared the grain of God's people for the Lord, they were entitled to enjoy the fruits of their labour. And it would seem that this same logic would apply to Paul. In his ministry, he has the right to enjoy the benefits of his work.

He should be able to be funded or supported by his labours as a missionary. However, in dealing with the Corinthians, Paul did not exert this. In other cases, he did take funding, but not with them.

In 2 Corinthians 11, verses 7-9, Teachers like Paul could be supported in a number of different ways.

They could charge fees. Certain philosophers would go around and charge fees for their speeches. Others would be supported by a wealthy patron, which had problems because they would be beholden to that person, and possibly end up being compromised in their ability to tell the truth.

A third type of philosopher went around begging, supporting themselves by pestering the general population for funds. There was, however, a fourth option, and Paul took this one when dealing with the Corinthians.

[8 : 23] This was to support oneself. In Acts chapter 18, verses 1-3, we read, Paul's point in taking this approach is not to place a burden on the Corinthians.

And this passage isn't placing pressure on the Corinthians to offer such support. He's not blaming them at this point. He's not saying that they need to mend their ways and start to give him money.

Indeed, Paul goes on to make the most startling of claims. He said he would rather die than be deprived of his boast. What is his boast? It's his stewardship of the gospel.

He is not a mercenary. He's a man with a God-given vocation. And in declaring the gospel free of charge, as a servant of Christ, he displays the gospel in his actions. Christ himself didn't exert his prerogatives, but he laid them aside to go to the cross.

Paul has become a servant to all in order to win as many as possible. He's not in it for himself. He's not in it to make a profit. He's in it as a servant. He becomes like the Jews to win the Jews.

[9 : 43] He becomes like those under the law to win those under the law. He becomes like those outside of the law to win them, and like the weak to win them. He becomes like the Jews. It's a strange thing to say, because Paul himself is a Jew.

However, he has ceased to be what he once was. He is no longer defined by his old way of life. And so when he relates to the Jews as a Jew, he is stepping back into an old form of life that he is no longer defined by.

He no longer sees himself primarily as someone of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He is now a man in Christ. It is no longer he who lives, but Christ who lives in him. He becomes like those under the law.

He's no longer under the law in the sense that he once was. But if it makes it easier to win people for Christ who are under the law, he will act as one under the law. He also becomes like those outside of the law, while clarifying that he is still under the law of Christ.

This is a new law he lives in terms of, the law set by Christ's own pattern and example. Finally, he becomes like the weak. And in this, he presents an example to the strong in Corinth.

[10 : 49] He wants to protect the weak. He wants to win them for the gospel. And this is in great contrast to those who are prepared to destroy them for the sake of their knowledge, a knowledge that puffs up and does not build up.

And all of this is for the sake of the gospel. Paul is a steward of the gospel, and he wants to be faithful in his stewardship. He concludes by exhorting the Corinthians to see themselves like athletes.

Athletes control and limit themselves in order to win a prize. And the Christian should be the same. The strong should be like athletes. They follow Paul's example. They discipline themselves for the sake of the goal that really matters.

It's the growth of the kingdom, and being faithful to the stewardship of the gospel that's committed to us. And if that requires that we do not exert our rights, then we do not exert our rights.

A question to consider. How does Paul's teaching in this chapter challenge our notions of freedom and rights?