

The Gospel Must Come First!

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[0 : 0 0] Paul, you don't look like an apostle. You don't speak like an apostle. You don't act like an apostle. If you're not an apostle, why should we listen to anything you say?

Compared to some of the other preachers they had heard, the Corinthians had a fair point. Paul didn't dress in the clothes of a Greek philosopher. He didn't really cut an impressive figure in society. He was often stumbling and fearful in the way he spoke. He refused to engage in the oratorical style of the Greek philosophers. Paul worked as a tent maker to support his ministry, working with smelly leather to make ends meet rather than living in luxury.

So, by the standards of the day, the Corinthians were right. Paul did not look the part, speak the part, or act the part of an apostle. So, what gives him the right to teach concerning food, sacrifice to idols, as he did in chapter 8, or marriage and relationships, as he did in chapter 7?

What is a leader in the church meant to look like, sound like, and act like? Well, in this chapter, 1 Corinthians 9, Paul makes his defense. He opens himself up, and he reveals his motives.

Never is he more like Christ than when he talks of giving up his rights and being made of no reputation. Never is he more like Jesus than when he talks of offering salvation, free of charge to anyone who will believe.

[1 : 4 1] Well, what has any of this got to do with us? Much in every way. For a start, Paul's apostolic status means that all the letters he writes in the New Testament are authoritative. He speaks on behalf of Christ, so it's important that we're confident he really is an apostle. Secondly, Paul models for us godly leadership in the church, something we spoke about this morning. And thirdly, Paul is an example to us all as Christians of what it means to be single-minded in our pursuit of being like Jesus, of sacrificing our rights when we need to, and putting the gospel of Jesus Christ first in our lives.

This chapter passes through four stages. Our rights, verses 1 to 15. Our responsibilities, verses 16 through 18. Our service, verses 19 through 23. And our salvation, verses 24 to 27.

Paul didn't look much like a leader, but he did look like Christ. Which of the two is more important?

First of all then, our rights in verses 1 through 15, our rights. In this section, Paul is defending his apostolic credentials. He asks, have I not seen Jesus our Lord? The primary mark of an apostle is that he has physically seen the risen Lord Jesus Christ, as did Paul on the road to Damascus, and it changed his life forever. His preaching in Corinth won many to the gospel, and their conversions are, in his own words, the seal of his workmanship, his apostleship in the Lord, verse 2. The Holy Spirit worked in power through Paul's words, and many came to faith in Jesus.

As Paul himself said in 1 Corinthians 2, verse 2, I decided to do nothing among you except Christ and Him crucified. But these marks were not enough for some. They wanted Paul to look the part of a leader in the church, to have a secure home life, to be financially wealthy, and to be well respected by all. That is, after all, the way in which the Greek philosophers lived. Many of the other apostles took along with them a believing wife. So, Peter, James and Jude, the brothers of our Lord, for example, they had wives. They didn't have to work for a living, but were financially supported by the churches they served.

[4 : 37] We fondly talk of Paul as a tent maker, but don't understand, really, how hard and disgusting a job it was. Paul worked with leather, which had been cured in smelly chemicals. The leather itself was rough, and boring holes through the leather would have made Paul's hands rough and scarred. It was exhausting work.

As an apostle, he had the right to be financially supported by the churches to which he ministered. He asks, who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruits? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Having established his arguments from the Old Testament? Paul then asks, if we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much that we reap material things from you? Yes, Paul had every right to be financially supported by the church in Corinth, to never have to endure again these long nights in the workshop of working with smelly leather and making tents. He had the right to take along with him on his missionary travels a believing wife, to marry, to settle down, to have children, to live a normal family life. In verse 13, he continues, 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? And then he says one of those things that Jesus said, but it's not recorded in the Gospels. He says, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living from the gospel.

These are words Jesus said. Those who work full-time in gospel ministry should be supported by those to whom they are proclaiming the gospel. And this, among other reasons, is the justification for having full-time paid ministry workers. They should get their living by the gospel.

They shouldn't have to get another job to support themselves, which would take away from their ability to give their whole attention to the ministry to which God has called them.

But on two occasions, in verse 12 and 15, Paul says, we have not made use of this right.

[7 : 09] We have not made use of this right. He didn't insist on being married and having a secure home life. He didn't insist he gave up the right to be supported by the church in Corinth.

Through him, the Corinthian church had believed the gospel which gave them eternal life of far greater value than money can buy. Paul gave himself for them, working tirelessly at tent making so as not to be a burden to them. And in so doing, he didn't enjoy the same privileges as the other apostles, and almost certainly far less than the Greek philosophers of the day. He gave up his rights because, as he explains in verse 12, he did not want to put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

He did not want people to say of him, he only preaches the gospel because of financial rewards. He wanted to give the cynics no ground on which to stand. Now, you know and I know that historically, church leaders have sometimes lived in opulent wealth, far above the living standards of common people. Even today, celebrity pastors tend to be very wealthy.

You know, Alec will tell you, and I'll tell you, it's a good thing that nobody goes into the free church ministry to get rich, because they won't.

But it's really easy to see why outsiders would pour scorn on the gospel if its preachers live in such an opulent way. But Paul wanted to give outsiders no ground on which to become cynical.

[8 : 55] So, he refused to place any obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. And in this, he was never more like his master, Jesus. Jesus was by very nature God, yet he gave it all up.

He lived and died in poverty. He did not insist upon his own rights. He freely gave them all up for the sake of winning salvation for his people on the cross.

If Jesus walked among us today, he wouldn't be wearing the most expensive clothes. During his earthly ministry, it was said of him that he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, no beauty that we should desire him.

Like his master, Jesus, Paul didn't look much like the church leaders. But it wasn't in how Jesus looked, but in what he said and what he did that people realized he had another worldly authority.

Well, what's the message for us? We may have a right to recognition and status in the church. We may have a right to worldly gain from the church. We may have a right that everyone should speak well of us.

[10 : 13] We may have a right to these things, but if we want to be like Jesus, we must be willing to give them all away. We must be willing to be misunderstood and criticized. We must be willing to give up our right to personal luxury and economic wealth if the gospel demands it.

We are never more like the Lord Jesus Christ than when we do not hold on to our status in the church, but give it all up for his sake. I remember Donald MacLeod once saying that if we want to be like Jesus, we must be willing to give up our respectability.

We must choose to be like Jesus, giving up our rights, whatever that may cost us, or to aspire after status and wealth in the church.

We cannot have both. Our rights. That's the longest section. Second, our responsibilities. Our responsibilities.

As Westerners, we're big on our rights, but not so much on our responsibilities. But even for us citizens, there's always a balance to be struck between our rights and our responsibilities.

[11 : 27] As Christians, we have certain rights in the church, but as we've seen from our first point, there are times when we must not insist upon our own rights, but think first and foremost about our responsibilities as Christians.

In these verses, from verse 16 to 18, Paul opens his heart. He talks here not of rights, but of necessities, of rewards, of stewardship.

These aren't rights, they are responsibilities, and they all coalesce around the central topic of preaching the gospel. Three times in these verses, he speaks of preaching the gospel, twice in verse 16, once in verse 18.

The thing is that Paul never lost his wonder at the privilege of being able to offer the gospel free of charge to all who will believe. For him, preaching was not a job, it was a lifestyle and a privilege.

He says in verse 16, necessity is laid upon me. Necessity is laid upon me. The minister is here, David, Alec, I don't know if any other ministers are here.

[12 : 42] I've got my glasses on. They'll tell you, a call to the ministry, when confronted by many other lucrative options, the prospective minister who feels called is compelled to go forward to the ministry.

It's not as if he doesn't have the ability to do other things. He does. He just can't. He feels in himself, woe to me if I do not preach the gospel.

He must. He has no other option but to obey God's compelling call to preach. He can raise a thousand objections to why he shouldn't go forward for the ministry, but the strength of the call of God crushes him into submission.

His greatest reward and satisfaction doesn't come from his bank balance, not from the status he's afforded, but the privilege of being able to present the gospel free of charge.

That's his reward, the freedom to declare the love of God and the cross of Christ. He simply must preach, paid or not, respected or not.

[13 : 54] There's a discussion ongoing in our denomination at the moment about the nature of a call to the ministry. Is it about our subjective feeling of a call or is it about the objective assessment of others?

Must it be either or? Or in the light of these verses, can it not be both and? Both must be present for the call to be genuine. Both the inner compulsion from God under recognition from the church of character.

Are there any among us this evening who have the beginnings of this compulsion? Any upon whom God is laying upon the necessity to preach the gospel?

Any for whom the thought of not preaching the gospel is unthinkable? Any for whom the greatest reward they can conceive of is the opportunity to present the gospel free of charge?

If that describes you, do not allow your objections to overwhelm your sense of call. Act of the compulsion. It is not the path to respectability.

[15 : 08] And as David and Alec will tell you, it's certainly not the path to wealth. It's not the path to ease. But think of the reward of offering the gospel week by week and seeing people coming to a living faith in Jesus Christ.

Our responsibilities. Third, our service, verses 19 through 23. You know, the apostle Paul couldn't win.

He was attacked by Jewish Christians for not forcing the ceremonial aspects of Jewish law upon Gentile Christians. He did not demand that they be circumcised and obey Jewish food laws.

But then he was also attacked by Gentile Christians for being too Jewish and sometimes spending too much time in synagogues reasoning with Jews than he did with them. You know, it's not uncommon to hear Christians complaining about the church's great evangelists, those who have been particularly gifted by God to reach people for Christ.

They're often accused of watering down the gospel and using questionable methods. So this is nothing new. Paul was the victim of many criticisms. And this was certainly true when it came to his approach to eating food sacrificed to idols as we saw last week.

[16 : 35] Perhaps the Corinthian Christians wanted a more definite answer than Paul was willing to give. Paul didn't always give black and white answers. And as a rule, we human beings like black and white answers, not shades of gray answers where we've got to think for ourselves.

Well, in these verses, Paul is sharing his methodology. This is how he goes about evangelism. And his rationale is in verse 19. I have made myself a servant to all that I might win more of them.

Then in verses 23, he says, I do it all for the sake of the gospel that I may share with them in its blessings. But the highlight is in verse 22.

I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. Well, we can criticize Paul as much as we like for how he seems to vacillate between a Jewish and a Gentile position.

We can criticize him for his apparent weaknesses rather than being the strong, decisive leader that we might want him to be. But he's got bigger concerns than our criticisms.

[17 : 49] His primary ambition is to become all things to all people that by all means he might save some. He has become not just a servant to the church in Corinth but to those outside the church in Corinth.

He's serving them by becoming like them in order to gain a hearing for the gospel he's preaching. To the Jews, he's saying, I've got a lot of Jewish experts here tonight so please forgive me if I'm wrong.

To the Jews, he's saying, you know, you don't have to abandon your Jewishness to become a Christian. See, I haven't. All you have to do is believe in Christ. To the Gentiles, he's saying, see, you don't have to become a Jew to become a Christian.

See how I love you. All you have to do is to believe in Christ. But you know, Paul here is doing nothing more than his master Jesus did. The King of Heaven, Jesus, became, emptied himself and became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, the Lord of glory through whom the universe was created became a baby who could not talk.

Jesus became like us to win us for himself. And Paul became like those to whom he was preaching the gospel in order to win them for Jesus.

[19 : 10] Hudson Taylor did the same in China. Dressed like a Chinese man, was heavily criticized by his fellow missionaries for doing so. But he did it to gain a hearing among Chinese people for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He became all things to all men that by all means he might save some. We need to return to this in a future sermon, but time forces us not to speak much more of it now other than to apply it into our situations.

How shall we win people for Christ unless for Christ's sake we become like those people we are trying to reach? Let's think about it for ourselves and ask to what lengths am I willing to go to win Thornwood for Christ and Glasgow for Christ?

To what lengths am I willing to go? Experts in mission call it incarnational or contextualization, but it's no more than what Paul says here when he says, I've become all things to all people that by all means I might save some.

And you know what? Surely the criticisms of those we do not agree with is nothing compared to the joy of seeing those we share the gospel with coming to faith in Jesus.

[20 : 33] Well, lastly, we've seen our rights, our responsibilities, our service, lastly, our salvation. Verses 24 through 27. Every couple of years the city of Corinth would host what was called the Isthmian Games.

Second only in the ancient world to the Olympic Games. The sporting references Paul uses in these verses are taken from the Isthmian Games, athletics and boxing. These are activities with which the Corinthian church, Corinthian Christians, would have been very familiar having witnessed every two years the country's best athletes and boxers at work.

And Paul uses the imagery of these sports to drive home a point or a few points. In the first instance he speaks of himself as an athlete. An athlete. The word for athlete is the word from which we get our English word agony.

Agony. For as much as Paul is using the Isthmian Games as a picture of the Christian life, the Christian life is not a game. It requires the kind of effort an athlete exerts when he's running or boxing.

There is sweat involved, there is pain involved in devoting oneself to Christ and refusing to bend to this world's standards. To what extent are we expending effort as Christians?

[21 : 57] Are we spiritually sweating in pursuit of living out the glorious gospel? What's it costing us to be Christians? It cost Paul much.

Stable home life, financial security and so on. What is it costing us to share the gospel with those who do not yet believe in Jesus? Are we straining our mental, emotional and spiritual muscles in figuring out how to share the good news?

And then he speaks of disciplining his body, of exercising self-control in all things. You know, they say, I wouldn't know this, but they say that in order to excel, the athlete must control what he eats and the activities in which he engages.

He cannot do many things which in and of themselves are lawful, but would hamper his training program. He cannot overindulge in alcohol, he cannot undersleep, he cannot oversleep, he cannot eat the wrong things.

He's got to control himself. In the same way to excel as an evangelist, Paul has to forgo many things which in and of themselves are lawful, like having a wife, like having a secure financial status.

[23 : 12] He's got his eyes on a prize, winning souls for Jesus. Are there lawful things we may have to do, we may have to deny ourselves rather, are there lawful things we may have to deny ourselves in order to get a hearing for the gospel?

What are these things? One might be the right to state a political viewpoint. That might be one.

Keep your politics to yourself. Another one might be the right to speak about cultural issues. Think about it.

There are many, many more. Things which are lawful, but we may have to deny ourselves the right to do and say if we want to get a hearing for the gospel. Then Paul also speaks of being disqualified, having preached to others, but having failed to keep his own body under control.

He's not referring here to losing his salvation. He's referring, rather, to losing his reward of seeing people coming to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior because he can't control himself.

[24 : 24] That is the greatest reward he knows. To know that someone will enjoy eternal life and blessedness because you expended the effort to share the gospel with them and they believed is the greatest of all rewards.

This is the greatest reward, greater than financial security or status in this world of the church. And then lastly, Paul speaks of an imperishable crown, perishable wealth, but we an imperishable, verse 25.

In verse 25 there, he speaks of a perishable wealth, a crown of victory the winning athlete receives at the end of his race in the Ithnian Games. Paul isn't interested in that perishable wealth, the wreath of the world's applause which is so fickle soon decay.

He's interested in an imperishable crown, the crown of salvation and glory which the Lord will give to all those who have lived faithfully for him. Is this the crown which motivates us to discipline ourselves, to control ourselves, to deny ourselves, in order that others may hear the good news of Jesus Christ from our lips?

I close with the words of a famous redemption hymn I first heard in the Fisherman's Hall in Brora and which has deeply influenced my understanding of why it's so important that we as Christians follow in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul and most importantly Jesus in winning souls for the gospel.

[26 : 16] I'm going to repeat it in full with the prologue that to have stars in one's crown is to have won people for Jesus.

Okay? To have stars in one's crown is to have won people for Jesus. I'm not going to sing it thankfully but I'll repeat it.

I am thinking today of that beautiful land I shall reach when the sun goeth down when through wonderful grace by my Savior I stand will there be any stars in my crown?

In the strength of the Lord let me labor and pray let me watch as a winner of souls that bright stars may be mine in the glorious day when His praise like the sea below roll.

Oh, what joy will it be when His face I behold living gems at His feet to lay down? It would sweeten my bliss in the city of gold should there be any stars in my crown.

[27 : 25] Will there be any stars any stars in my crown when at evening the sun goeth down? When I wake with the blessed in the mansions of rest will there be any stars in my crown?

in my crown? I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.