

Freedom and rights

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 0 0] The reading today is taken from 1 Corinthians chapter 9 verses 1 to 23 and you can find that on page 1151 of the church bibles. 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 Zephias? 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. You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain. Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake? 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 out of my own will, I have a reward, but 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 a Jew, in order to win Jews.

[3 : 1 6] 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.

Our God and Saviour who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. Heavenly Father, we praise you for this great gospel we've been singing about, for the great God about whom we sing. And we pray now, our Father, as we hear your word, as we look at it together, we pray please that you might be at work in each one of us, such that we too might desire all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, do please sit down and turn, if you will, to 1 Corinthians chapter 9, as we continue our series in 1 Corinthians. 1 Corinthians chapter 9, that reading which we had, page 1152. And the summary verse of our passage is verse 22, as the Apostle Paul says, I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

You'll know by now, hopefully, the aim of the Apostle Paul, as he writes this letter, is not simply that as a church we would believe the gospel, but actually we would then be shaped by the gospel as well. And so our aim for this morning, as we look at 1 Corinthians 9, is that each one of us would be willing to give up our culture and give up our rights, whether they are real rights or whether they're perceived rights, for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of others hearing the message of Jesus Christ.

[5 : 38] Now, that is vital in any culture because, humanly speaking, the progress of the gospel, the progress of the message of Jesus, depends on Christian believers doing just that. The progress of the gospel in London, across the UK, indeed across the world, depends, humanly speaking, on our willingness to live our lives in such a way that what matters most to us is the progress of the gospel and others coming to put their trust in the message of Jesus Christ.

But it's vitally important in our culture because we, of course, live in a culture, don't we, which so often is obsessed by rights, the expression of rights and the protection of rights, whether they're human rights generally or women's rights or gay rights or the right to strike or the right of victims or minority rights, whatever it is, the rights of free speech.

And therefore, 1 Corinthians chapter 9 could not be more countercultural for us as Paul speaks of the need to give up those rights and to lay those rights aside.

Last week, if you were here, we started looking at this major section in 1 Corinthians chapters 8 to 10. Please do listen to last week's talk if you missed it. These four talks in chapters 8 to 10, they all hang together. They're all of a piece.

We saw last week the issue in chapter 8 is whether Christians should eat food that has been sacrificed to a pagan idol. And the summary verse, verse 13, therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I'll never eat meat lest I make my brother stumble.

[7 : 17] And now in chapter 9, Paul extends that principle of chapter 8 of giving up our freedom in order to build up other Christian believers to chapter 9, giving up our freedom or our rights, as he calls it, in order to win those who are not yet followers of Jesus.

And this, says Paul, is the normal Christian life. Not just for some, but the normal Christian life. May I say too, if you're here this morning and you are looking in on the Christian faith, then we are delighted, as always, that you are here.

And I hope this morning you will see something, as last week, of what it would mean to follow Jesus, should you come to put your trust in him and follow him. Well, you'll see on the outline there are three points.

First of all, Paul had rights, and so do we. Paul had rights, and so do we. Have a look at chapter 9, verses 1 and 2. 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'm not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

[8 : 31] It seems there are rumblings in Corinth. We've seen this before, but it seems there are rumblings in Corinth that some may not be a proper, that the apostle Paul may not be a proper apostle.

And Paul's defense is very simple. It is that, like the other apostles, he saw the risen Jesus face to face, referring to his Damascus road conversion. Indeed, he says, verse 2, the very existence of this church in Corinth is divine recognition, if you like, of his apostolic authority.

But the problem, as far as the Corinthians were concerned, was that Paul didn't look like an apostle. His message was weak. It seems in person he was unimpressive. And now, chapter 9, he has given up things that he was entitled to.

Surely, if Paul really was an apostle, he wouldn't behave like that. He would insist on his rights. And so, in verses 3 to 14, Paul says he does have rights, and he'd be perfectly free to exercise those rights.

In verse 4, the right to be paid for food and drink. Verse 5, the right to be accompanied by a wife. Verse 6, the right to be paid sufficient, such that he doesn't have to get a job and earn a living.

[9 : 51] These, as Paul, are genuine rights that he has as an apostle. And in verses 7 to 14, he justifies them as legitimate. Let's just, we won't spend ages on this, but let's just glance down.

So, verse 7, from natural justice, the soldier is paid, the vineyard worker eats some of the grapes, the shepherd gets some of the milk. In verses 8 to 12, he argues from the Old Testament, have a look, for example, at verse 9.

For it's written in the law of Moses, you shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain. Is it for oxen that God is concerned? God cares about animal welfare? How much more about human beings?

Just as in verses 10 and 11, the farmer has a right to expect a reward from his hard work. In verse 13, he justifies his rights on the basis of Old Testament temple practice.

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? What's more, verse 14, the Lord Jesus himself commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel, possibly a reference to Luke chapter 10, verse 7, where the Lord Jesus says the worker deserves his wages.

[11 : 14] Paul had rights, and so do we. They may be rights sort of legally enshrined in law, so to speak, or they may be perceived rights, which he thought he had, which we may feel that we have.

Just think of the Sofa Gates row on Breakfast TV a few weeks ago when the new presenter, Dan Walker, sat on the left-hand side of the screen. And I noticed, actually, that Adrian stood on the left-hand side.

I don't know whether anything was implied by that, but I just comment on it in passing. But the alleged sexism of those TV producers who tend to put men on the left, the idea, I think, being that we sort of naturally, as we watch the television, our eyes naturally focus on the left, and therefore we tend to assume that person is more senior than the person who is on the right.

And then the fight back, of course, when on the one show, Alex Jones pinched Matt Baker's seat, and on ITV's breakfast show, Holly Willoughby pinched Philip Schofield's seat.

Rights matter, don't they? Just last week, should women tennis players be paid less than men, or the same as men? Rights matter. And Paul had rights.

[12 : 34] Genuine, legitimate, biblical, Jesus-centered rights. But you say, why do we need to know that Paul had rights?

Well, because throughout 1 Corinthians 8-10, Paul is deliberately setting himself up as an example for every Christian to follow and imitate. Just look, will you, at chapter 11, verse 1, which is where this whole unit, chapters 8-10, really finishes.

Chapter 11, verse 1, Be imitators of me as I am of Christ. Now, often, of course, in the New Testament, we can't do that. The apostles were unique as the founders of the New Testament church, and therefore, very often, we need to be very wary of saying, this is what the apostles did, and therefore, this is what we should do.

But in chapters 8-10, Paul says, you see, very specifically, we are to imitate him just as he imitates Christ. Because all of us have rights, don't we?

Some of those rights are enshrined in the law. Others are rights which we perceive that we have. Perhaps that our qualifications give us the right to a particular quality of life.

[13 : 52] Perhaps the right to be paid a certain amount of money. Perhaps to be working in a satisfying and stimulating environment. Or to live in a well-to-do part of London.

We may feel, some of us, we have the right to get married. The right to have children. The right to financial security. The right to have time to ourselves. The right, perhaps, looking further ahead to retirement.

To putting our feet up and having an easy life. Or perhaps the right to be well thought of by other people. Paul had rights.

And we have rights. Real rights and perceived rights. But secondly, Paul gave up his rights.

And so should we. Paul gave up his rights. Have a look at verse 12. Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right.

[14 : 54] But we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. You see, Paul gives up his rights where they hinder the work and progress of the gospel.

Verse 15, he says the same thing. But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor my writing these things to secure any such provision. Paul hasn't used his rights, nor is this simply a kind of thinly disguised appeal to get the Corinthians to pay him.

Why? Well, it's all for the sake of the gospel. I don't know if you noticed as this passage was being read by Tom how frequently the word gospel is repeated in this section.

So it comes, first of all, I think in verse 12, and then twice in verse 14, twice in verse 16, twice in verse 18, and finally in verse 23.

Because you see, when it comes to Paul and thinking about his rights, it is the gospel and what is best for the gospel that trumps all other considerations.

[16 : 05] Now that is unpacked in verses 16 to 18. Paul gives up his right to be paid so he can offer the gospel for free. He can't boast or take pride in the fact that he preaches the gospel.

Verse 16, 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. God called him to be an apostle to the Gentiles, and therefore he is compelled to preach.

Verse 17, For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. Now his reward, verse 18, is seeing the gospel preached for free in Corinth and deciding not in Corinth to use his rights.

Verse 18, 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 rights in the gospel.

Now it may well be that Paul wants to make it clear that he wasn't in it for the money. That unlike the flashy orators and public speakers in Corinth whose status was determined by the fee they commanded, he wanted to make the point that was not true for him.

[17 : 22] Who knows, perhaps he even published his tax return or something like that. You never know. But whatever the precise reason, Paul, you see, has given up something which was a legitimate, biblical, Jesus-centered right, he's laid it aside so as not to frustrate the progress of the gospel.

Last year was the 130th anniversary of the traveling to China in 1885 of the Cambridge Seven, as they were known, six Cambridge students and one from the Royal Military Academy who left England to join the work of Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission in China.

And their departure apparently caused a tremendous sensation here before they left and across the country as they left behind lives of great privilege and promise and did so for the sake of Christ.

One of them, C.T. Studd, you may know, played cricket for England in the original Ashes match against Australia, giving up their rights for the sake of the gospel.

Now, I think this is the question, how does that make you feel? Well, you say, that's all very well for the really keen Christian, but I'm hardly in that league. But remember chapter 11, verse 1, be imitators of me as I am of Christ.

[18 : 49] Paul gave up his rights and so should we. A Christian, you see, is not simply someone who believes the gospel and no more, but someone who is then shaped by the gospel.

So let me ask, are we in the habit of foregoing our rights, whether real legal rights or perceived rights for the sake of the gospel? It's not easy, is it?

We'll see more of that next week. I'll just look on to the next paragraph to verses 24 to 27. We'll spend much more time here next week, but Paul speaks of having to fix our minds on eternity, verse 24, on the prize.

He speaks, verse 25, of self-control, verse 26, of discipline. But surely the point is this, isn't it, that in a society obsessed by rights, as ours is obsessed by rights, then actually the evidence of our faith in the Lord Jesus will be shown at least in part by our willingness to give up those rights and lay aside those rights for the sake of the gospel.

Some of us will regularly be in the habit of doing that. Perhaps the right to put our feet up after a long day's work and instead to prepare a Bible study or Sunday club.

[20 : 18] Or perhaps for those at school, the right to go to a lunchtime club and play sport and instead go to the Christian meeting. Perhaps for others, the right to go on the same kind of holiday as our peers.

Because actually what we want to do is to give more money for the progress of the gospel. Now, can I say, if you're not in the habit of doing that, I think it must beg the question, doesn't it?

Is your life ordered around the gospel and serving others? Or is your life actually simply ordered around living the kind of life you'd really like to live anyway and serving yourself?

So what rights are you clinging to? Well, perhaps the right to earn a city salary, the right to pursue your career, the right to live in this particular part of London or perhaps in London at all.

perhaps the right to leisure time or the right to own property or the right to have an energetic and fun social life to keep up with all your friends or the right to pursue a particular sport which you love or to have time to yourself or perhaps the right to be well regarded by others.

[21 : 29] Are we prepared, you see, to do the very costly thing of putting aside our rights for the sake of reaching the 95% of the British population who do not know Jesus Christ?

Why not discuss over coffee what are your non-negotiables? The things which either consciously or unconsciously we would not give up for the sake of others hearing the gospel.

Paul had rights, so do we. Paul gave up his rights, so should we. Thirdly, to save some. Verse 19, for though I'm free from all, I've made myself a servant to all that I might win more of them.

Here then is the governing principle of the chapter, you see, rather than Paul thinking of himself as someone with rights, he describes himself as a servant, literally as a slave, a servant of all, someone with no rights.

Why, verse 19, why to win others for Christ? It's very simple. Verse 22, verse 20 rather, that is repeated, that I might win. Verse 21, that I might win.

[22 : 44] And in the summary, verse 22, what does he say? I've become all things to all people, but by all means I might save some. Well, you say, what does that look like in practice?

Well, as we look at these verses, verses 19 to 23, will you notice what Paul will do for the gospel? And will you notice what he won't do, where he draws a line, what his limits are? So verse 20, to the Jew, he became like a Jew.

He'll eat kosher meals. In other words, he won't flaunt his freedom, so to speak, to eat pork when he's in a restaurant in order to remind them that actually we're free to eat what we like.

But verse 21, to those outside the law, I became as one outside the law. Bacon butties are on the menu when he meets up with Gentile, non-Jewish people. You see, he's flexible.

And then verse 22, to the weak, he became weak, just as Jesus mixed with the weak, the tax collectors, the sinners, the outcasts, and so on. But notice, really, the two things that Paul won't do.

[23 : 47] First of all, verse 21, he won't sin. He describes, isn't he, just that little phrase in brackets, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ.

He won't be so flexible that actually he's drawn into sin. In other words, he's not going to get drunk in order to show he can kind of enjoy himself at a party or something like that to win the drunkards.

He won't blaspheme and swear in order to gain street cred from friends. He won't sin. But the second thing he won't do is he won't distort the gospel.

After all, this is all, isn't it, for the sake, verse 23, of the gospel. And therefore, he won't change or distort the gospel. We get a very good example of this in terms of Paul and circumcision.

So you may know that in Acts chapter 16, Paul has his co-worker Timothy circumcised. Timothy gives up, if you like, his right not to be circumcised for the sake of reaching Jewish people with the gospel.

[24 : 48] But in Galatians, where some are insisting on circumcision as necessary to be a Christian, Paul condemns them as false teachers. You see, being flexible like this, being all things to all people, doesn't mean he's flip-flopping all the time.

Like an unprincipled politician, he won't change the message, but nonetheless, where the gospel isn't at stake, where the message itself isn't at stake, then he is culturally flexible.

when Hudson Taylor first went to China to set up the China Inland Mission with the gospel in the 1850s, he adopted, and he deliberately adopted, Chinese customs and dress codes.

So he wore some long robes and Chinese hairstyle, which at the time included having a ponytail at the back. Much to the annoyance of British officials who wanted him to dress as a Victorian gentleman, to demonstrate the superiority as they thought of British culture over Chinese culture.

But Hudson Taylor insisted on becoming like the Chinese in order to win the Chinese, to make the point that to be a Christian, you don't have to be British, that the gospel doesn't belong to any one particular culture.

[26 : 06] The message remains the same, but churches will and should look different in different cultures. cultures. Paul is willing to surrender his rights, to live according to his culture and within his comfort zone.

Now I think it's very easy to miss how hard this would have been for Paul. See, now imagine Paul, who we saw through Acts a couple of years ago, so often was vigorously opposed by Jewish believers and especially by the Jewish religious establishment, how hard it would have been for him to mix with them.

But how hard too it would have been for Paul, having been trained as a high-flying rabbi, then to mix with Gentiles as well. Very costly.

You see, Paul is a great model to us of promoting the gospel at great personal cost and in doing so, doing so for God's glory and bringing glory to him.

Well, what about us? Is this how you make decisions? Is this how we encourage and train our children to make decisions?

[27 : 23] Not notice what makes me most comfortable. Isn't that how the world makes decisions? You know, what I feel comfortable with? No, not that, but what is best for the gospel to save some, which of course may actually be very uncomfortable.

It's a question I guess isn't to ask of our friendships. How can we be better at crossing cultural barriers? That neighbor, that colleague, that person at school from a different culture, how can we reach them with the gospel?

It's a question to ask of big decisions in life as well as small decisions in life. So big decisions in life, work for example, not what's best for my career to advance my career, but actually what is best for the gospel.

A friend of mine who works in the city decided last year it was time for him to move job, not because his career was running out of steam, but because over the previous years at his present job he had prayed and consciously tried to speak everyone in his office about the Lord Jesus.

And actually in God's kindness he'd been able to do that. And so he decided that now is the time to move on and to pray that he'd be able to do that in a different company with different people.

[28 : 44] But of course equally we may decide to stay in our job for the sake of the gospel and to stay where we are. The important thing is what is governing the decisions we make for the sake of the gospel.

So big decisions but also small decisions. Whether or not to get a dog. For example, my observation is that lots of people in Dulwich get to a certain stage in life and decide to get a dog.

But I take it that if we are Christians then rather than simply thinking of a dog as a lifestyle accessory which would be nice to have, then we need to ask exactly the same question. Would it be good for the gospel?

It might be very good for the gospel. Becoming like the dog owners of Dulwich in order to win the dog owners of Dulwich. But it could of course be the most terrible distraction of time, energy and money and so on.

It's a question to ask as a church, isn't it? Perhaps we might give up the rights to sing our favorite songs in order to make sure we're singing songs which would be accessible to an outsider who came in to visit.

[29 : 59] Or to think about crossing cultural barriers to reach the housing estate just over the road. What would that look like for us to give up our cultural barriers to do that and to cross cultural barriers for that?

Well, there are loads of other implications and I encourage you to look at the questions there on the outline to think about them. Can I say, if you're here this morning and you are not yet a follower of Jesus, I'm very conscious this will feel very, very, alien to us indeed because we live in a world, don't we, where people obsess about their rights.

And the reason, of course, this is the model of the Christian life is precisely because of what we have heard already this morning. That Jesus Christ, who as God in the flesh, God come into the world, why he was the one person in history who if you like had more rights than anyone else at all.

And yet he gave them up. He came into the world, he came not to be served, but to serve, to die in our place as a ransom, that those who trust in him might be forgiven and enjoy life with God both in this world and the next.

1 Corinthians 11 verse 1, be imitators of me, says Paul, as I am of Christ. Christ. Let's have a few moments quiet and then I'll pray.

[31 : 26] I do it all for the sake of the gospel that I may share with them in its blessings. Heavenly Father, we're very conscious that we live in a culture that is so focused on rights.

We praise you for the Lord Jesus who came to earth giving up his rights, so to speak. We praise you for the apostle Paul so clearly giving up his rights for the sake of others, hearing the gospel.

And we confess, Heavenly Father, when we are unwilling to give up our rights, when we hold on to our rights in this way. And we pray that like the apostle Paul, we might be willing to become all things to all people, that by all means some might be saved.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.