The rights of an apostle

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Preacher: Rev Gareth Regan

[0:00] Thank you, James, for that reading. It's quite a long, challenging reading in many ways.

It's not one that I really want to go verse by verse through. Equally, I recognised this week as I was reading it, it could seem as one that I could preach to say, you guys should pay me more for preaching the gospel.
That would be a really good use of those first 18 verses, as I highlight to you that today I come to you preaching the gospel and you should make sure I have a really good living whilst I do it.
However, I don't think that's what Paul was actually really pushing at. I don't think he's making a plea for finances or that people should dip into their pockets.
Because this is a mirror to 1 Corinthians 8 that you heard last week. 1 Corinthians 8 last week sits very much in that space of asking the question, what is the legalities that we should follow as Christians?
[1:10] What do we not have to do? So what's the liberal things we can get away with and do and enjoy life? And somewhere in the middle, there's Christian life. Where we're not overly legalistic, as Paul points out that the Jewish people were.

But equally, because we're not under the law doesn't mean we can run around in utter freedom doing whatever we want. Instead, we must walk a middle path. And so Paul's been explaining that in 1 Corinthians 8.
Very theological, quite a lot of thought in that. And so 1 Corinthians 9, I think, is him saying to the people of Corinth, who would have read this letter maybe in its entirety, that have sat down, would have been called to the assembly, and they'd have heard all of that first section.
And by the way, when it was first read, it wouldn't have come in neat chapters. Nobody said this is the first letter to the Corinthians, because they didn't know there's a second letter or a third letter or a fourth letter coming.
They just knew that they'd received a letter from Paul. And equally, it wasn't split into chapters. So there's nobody saying, oh, we're going to stop at the end of this chapter. Instead, they would read on to find out how Paul was developing that thought.
[2:20] And so this is a very natural way of developing that thought from what we know as chapter 8. He says, let me explain to you the life you've seen me live that says this is how we do life together.

That if I'm trying to live a life that doesn't say I have everything and you need to give me everything, because that's the law, and neither do I say that I am completely free to do whatever I want.
Instead, there is a middle way, and it looks like this. Our society would probably say today, quite often, I have rights.
I have rights to do what I want to do. And different people will see those rights in different ways. If you spend any time on the internet, it's really easy to find somebody who's about to be arrested by the police, who will say to the police officer, you don't have the right to arrest me.
I'm a free human being who's walking upon the land, and I can do whatever I like, and I find you to be oppressive, and therefore you need to stake a step back, because I'm not under your rules and regulations, because I'm a free human being under the gift of God.
[3:44] That exists on the internet. I've watched it. I promise you there are people roaming the world who are literally saying, my rights to be free cannot possibly be changed.

And Paul starts by pointing out all of his rights. He wants to say, I have rights. And we want to say, don't we, we have rights.
You have rights not to be abused by me, your vicar. You have rights not for me, not to tell you to do stuff that isn't biblical, because I've kind of wheedled my way through the scriptures.

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I have rights, because I'm a human being, but also a rights is a church leader. Everybody has rights.
But the most important thing to remember is our rights aren't the highest Christian value. And Paul spends, up until kind of verse 14, really trying to help people understand that he has a whole load of rights, but he then goes on to help us understand that they're not the most important thing.
[4:55] So if you've come here today because you're somebody who says, I have rights, and those rights cannot be beaten by anybody else, Christianity has something different for you this morning.

It says, I might have all of those rights, but I choose to surrender them all. So verse 15 comes along, and Paul says, but I have not used any of these rights, and I'm not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me.
For he would rather die, he would rather die, than allow anyone to deprive him of his boast. I felt a little guilty at that point.
Paul would rather die, than have anybody support him in his ministry, said I, from the house that's provided by the diocese, driving a car that I've paid with, with the money that the diocese have paid me to be your vicar.
Paul would rather die. So we've got to work out why he's being so animated for this. Because he wants the Corinthians, who are living in a world where they are putting their rights above anything else, to really understand what he gave up when he came to be amongst them.
[6:17] He wanted them to know that he surrendered everything, so that by some way, he might save a few. He does it so that he might save a few people, and so that people can't say to him, ah, you're only doing it for the money.

You're only doing it because it means you don't have to work. Christian freedom isn't primarily, it's I can, I can do this, I can do that.
It's more about, I don't have to. I don't have to win this argument. And I think sometimes Christianity can become like that. You meet somebody who isn't a Christian, and they say, oh, I've got some clever theological or philosophical or epistemological argument, and you think, that's it, I've read my Bible, it's time to go to war.
Paul says, that might be the right thing to do, but it might be our freedom. It might be also, I don't have to have things my way.
We all like things a certain way, don't we? The old adage of Burger King is, you can have it your way. You know, just tell us how you want us to create a burger, and we'll do it for you. And society says, have it your way.
[7:41] But sometimes Christians, it's about saying, I don't have to have things my way. I don't have to protect every preference that I've got. I don't have to demand everything that I'm entitled to, because Christ has set me free from worrying about those things.

I'm free from doing all of those things. I don't have to exist under this argument. Notice what Paul says in kind of verses 19 to 23 there.
He said, though I am free, and I belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. And then he goes through this lovely to and fro about the things that he did so that he could claim as many people as possible.
And it's hard to maybe understand what that looks like in modern society. But let me share with you a story. Over the summer, you will all remember, it got pretty warm, didn't it?
It got pretty warm, that even in the mornings, it was getting pretty hot. Like, I remember getting in the car and thinking, oh my goodness, it's only nine o'clock in the morning. It's already 23, 24 degrees.
[8:50] And so at Abbotsbury Church, when I was there, and that's the only church I was at, I was turning up in shorts and a short-sleeved caracal shirt and a pair of sandals. And that's how I led church.

One morning, I saw Dave, and I said, Dave, I'm preaching at St. Paul's on Sunday. Do you think I could turn up in my shorts?
Somebody over went, Dave went, I said, I've put in a pair of trousers, shall I?
He said, yeah, I think that'd be great. Because for you to hear my message that morning, if I was stood here in a pair of shorts, some of you would be like, why is he got his legs out?
But the people don't need to hear Malcolm preach in his shorts. People don't need to see Malcolm. And so what you wear is really important. And so what you wear is really important. Equally, when I

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go to St. Mary's, Walborough, I put on a cassock and a surplus and a preaching scarf.
[9:59] Because if I turned up in just my normal clothes, they would find it difficult to hear me. They'd be wondering, is he going to put his cassock on just before communion? Equally, if I was in Abbotsbury, and I said this to the guys this morning, and the looks I got were like, yes, you're absolutely right.

If I turned up in a cassock, a white alb, with a green chasubble poncho thing on, and a green stole, and I stood in front of them this morning, they would all be thinking, he must be making a point. He must be making a point with what he's wearing. At some point, he's going to make reference. And if I made no reference to it, we'd get to the end of the service, and they'd be like, I didn't hear a word you were saying, because I was waiting for you to make a point about the thing you were wearing.
And so Paul, in the same way, when he was with Jews, he would be the perfect Jew. When he was with Gentiles, he'd be the perfect Gentile. He was like a chameleon. So that people could hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.
And I wonder whether our version of that might look like, when I turn up to somebody's house to eat, and they say to me, oh, the vicar's here, we should probably say grace. Gareth, would you say grace for us?
[11:10] And I think, I wonder whether you normally say grace in your house, or whether you're only saying grace at the dinner table because the vicar's turned up. And why have you asked me to say grace?

Do you think my prayers are more special than your prayers? Why don't you just say, if you normally say grace, say the grace that you normally say, just with me at your table? We change our behaviour, sometimes, for the wrong reasons.
So when I turn up to somebody's house, I'd much rather that I eat a meal with them in the way that we, they would normally eat a meal. I'd rather, if they normally say grace, than they say grace, in whichever way they do.
And if it's singing a song about Superman, then that's all well and good. Being the right thing to that person. So the question isn't about sharing the gospel.
What is my way of people discovering the good news of Jesus Christ? It should be, how does this person need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ?
[12:15] When you apply for a job in the Church of England, one of the things that is often asked of you as a vicar, which I think is a hilarious question, is what do you think the gospel of Jesus Christ is?

That's a question they ask vicars when we apply for jobs. It's often number one, two or three on the list. And I think it's a hilarious question. One, because I think, my goodness, if I've got to this stage in my life of following Christ, I can't define the gospel message.
Probably I should give up and go back to my retail work. But also, I think it's hard, because I don't think the gospel message is one singular paragraph. Because if we could put the gospel message into one singular paragraph, this is pretty thick, isn't it?
The gospel message is a challenging, difficult, broad, sometimes easy, sometimes hard message. For some of us, the gospel message today will be the excitement that we are wanted and created by God.
That you sit here, not by accident, but because God chose for you to be created. That could be your gospel message. For others who have had a difficult and challenging life, where love was in short supply, the fact that God loves you, may be your gospel message this morning.
[13:42] The God of the universe, the God who created all things, loves you. For those of you who know how bad and how sinful you are, and it eats you up every morning as you wake up, as you get dressed, and you worry about every interaction, knowing that God frees you from your sins, as we prayed those prayers, as you come to him in repentance, moment by moment, keeping a short account, that you are forgiven, and that opens up for you access to God.

Maybe your gospel message this morning. For others, it's knowing that there is a place in eternity for you, that if you come to know Jesus Christ, that he creates a place in eternity, that you can know.
And so when death comes, there's no fear, no worry, no anxiety for you, that you get to go to heaven. That could be your good news. Or it could be all of those things, or more.

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Each of us have our own good news. And our job as Christians isn't to tell people our good news, the thing that saved us. Otherwise, I'd be going around just preaching Ephesians 2.10, that's the only thing I'd go and tell people about.
Because it's the most important verse in the Bible to me. Ephesians 2.10, really important. For I am God's workmanship, created by him to do the good works he's created before me. That's my good news. It'd be my strapline.
[15:07] It should go on my tombstone when I die. That is the thing that I live for. And if I went and spent all my time saying that's the only thing that's important, people would be like, how does that work?

So here, Paul is saying, the gospel isn't a singular item. Instead, we look to do and say the things that help everybody understand.
But how do we do that? Verse 24 to 27 reminds us of something. You don't get to be a part-time Christian.
You don't get to be a Christian on a Sunday. You don't just get to be a Christian when you're with other Christians. You don't get to be a Christian just when you feel like it.
Paul here says, do you not know that in a race all the runners run but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. He's talking about this crown that will last forever and that is the crown of Christ.
[16:12] And he says very much in his writing in here and in other places that the thing of a Christian life is a race where we have to keep our eyes fixed on one thing and one thing alone and that is Jesus.

And that if we're going to be people who share the gospel, our lives have to match our words. Wouldn't it be ridiculous if you heard me preaching about forgiveness and yet any time any of you wronged me I held a grudge?
You'd be like, it sounds good doesn't it Gareth? But you don't do it. What if I preach about generosity but when you ask for my time I say I'm too busy because I'm a vicar. I've got too much in my diary I don't have time for you.
You'd say, you're not a very generous person are you? What if I was to preach about loving your neighbour but you found out that both the neighbours on either side of my house hated me because I was a miserable person to live next to?
You'd say, Gareth, you preach really well on a Sunday but my goodness we've learnt that your life doesn't live up to it. So I have only one choice because I come before you and it's a thing of a challenge of being a preacher is I have to live the words that I say and this is what Paul is saying here is that I have to fight like someone a boxer striking my body to make it a slave that I may preach to people so that I might not be disqualified from winning that prize so that my words and my life match so that the prizes that I want to share with you I might also win.
[17:57] Paul is wanting us to know that he is a wonderful example. He's wanting the people of Corinth to know that he is a good example to look to but Paul isn't the ultimate hero of the chapter.

Jesus is the ultimate hero of the chapter. Paul says I have become a slave to everyone because that is what Jesus did.
Not because what Paul thinks is right to become a slave to everyone. Not because he thinks oh I found a new way of escaping the mental load of humanity but because that's what I saw my saviour do.
That's what I understood in my conversion on the road to Damascus. The one who had the right for everything. If you think about who Jesus was he could have come into the earth and when the devil tempted him in the wilderness and said you could have everything he said it's already mine I have the right to it all.
But what did he choose? He chose to become a servant. Jesus was the one who could have been rich. He could turn water into wine he could create food out of nothing.
[19:15] If he wanted to have all of the gold he could have just made it. He could have been rich. but he chose to become poor. He could have had all the glory.

He could have taken Herod's throne within a second. He could have raised up all the troops that he needed. He could have been king of all Israel. But instead he chose the cross.
He chose to be hung in humiliation amongst the robbers. And the last thing that really blew my mind as I was thinking about what Christ had done in this example of servanthood.

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And I don't think I had really connected with this since I had written this week. And it's this thing. Jesus had the right to spend all of his life in heaven.
He never had to come down to earth. He didn't have to come down to earth. He didn't have to come and save our sins. But he chose to come and be amongst us. Jesus surrendered all of his rights for the sake of the good news of the glory of God.
[20:25] Christ Jesus in Philippines too. Christ Jesus made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant. This isn't about trying harder.

This isn't about being better. This isn't about you've got to find it within yourself to be better Christians today and tomorrow and the next day and the next day.
Because these last few verses help us understand that what we should be saying is how do I give myself to Christ and run this race that he might give me all the power and the strength to do the things he's called me to do.
Because if I keep my eyes focused on Christ nothing else can go wrong. That when difficulties and adversities assail me as Paul knew all too well Christ will be my rod and my staff.
He will support me through the valley of darkness. He will bring me out the other end. So maybe as we live in this world they ask constantly what are my rights?
[21:27] We should be people who say not what I'm entitled to but what will help someone come to Christ. Not how much can I get away with but how much am I willing to give. Not how can I make this church here suit my own preferences so that I can be comfortable on a Sunday morning.

But how can we become a church where people who don't know Jesus can hear the gospel? Because that is true freedom in Christ. You don't have to get your own way.
You don't have to protect every preference. You don't have to insist on every right because Christ has already won the victory. He's already won the war. won the fight's done.
The battle is over. Christ is victorious in heaven. Not one of us needs to go to fight for him because he's weak. He has given us himself to each and one of them and therefore you are free to give yourself to others.
So my hope is go away this week and maybe reread Corinthians 8 and Corinthians 9 with this kind of lens of having a look at that difference between legalism and liberalism.
[22:45] Understanding what Paul's saying here about the way he lived his life. About what does true freedom mean for you? And then maybe ask yourself the question, how do I need to come closer to Christ?

What are the things I'm holding on to that I need to give up? What are the behaviours and the actions that I'm trying to perform that are not good for the gospel of Jesus Christ? Where do my thoughts not match my actions?
Go away and take a moment to think about that, that each of us might grow to become more Christ-like as we journey on our race towards heaven. Amen.

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