

The Priority of the Gospel

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[0 : 00] So, please, turn to 1 Corinthians 9. 1 Corinthians 9.

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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 we not even, do we even more? Do not we even more, sorry.

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, but not of my own will. I am still entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my reward?

[3 : 41] 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. Well, may God bless the reading of his word to us this evening, indeed his entire word to us this evening.

Excuse me.

Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me. Okay.

Never been serenaded before, actually, but okay. Well, this evening, as I sort of said this morning, is on this similar kind of subject, and that is the priority of Christ.

The plan was to perhaps do this series in the evening, but on reflection and study and prayer, I've decided to move the series to the morning. So we're going to be going through the New Testament, a book at a time, and looking at the key parts in each book that focus on why Christ takes priority over all things. We've never done this before. It'll be just a clear-cut exposition of each book, but of course not verse by verse because we would never get through it in a morning. Nevertheless, we will make our way through the New Testament understanding the priority that Christ has and hopefully realign our hearts so that they're in line with the priorities that Christ has himself, namely doing the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven.

[5 : 45] The other thing to mention about this is that this particular passage is passage number two in the Trellis Discipleship Program. Now, that's already up and running. It was up and running before Christmas, and so this message is something that I've worked on previously and worked on with others in the fellowship previously, and it's part two in the series of the Discipleship Program. I wrote about it in the pastor's report. I don't remember which one it was, but I mentioned that this would be starting. It started before Christmas, and then this coming year, there'll be others joining at different parts of the year, points of the year rather, and taking it up. So, this message this evening is sort of comes out of a study, as it were, that is number two in the Trellis Discipleship Program.

So, what I would like to do is, as we have read 1 Corinthians 9, the first 18 verses together, is to summarize them. And the summary would be this, that what Paul does very brilliantly under, of course, God's divine will, is to shift our attention as he speaks. So, as he's speaking, as he's writing to the Corinthian church, you begin yourself focusing, and then all of a sudden, you're having to realign your focus. And Paul does this on purpose. So, he begins to start with talking about his apostleship, then talking about the rights of an apostle, then talking about the rights of those who are involved in gospel ministry, and then, of course, there's a shift moment, which happens in verse 12. And what he does is he almost turns everything that he has said on his head, yet, nevertheless, completely consistent with what he has said up to that point. So, while it looks about rights and responsibilities, why it looks as though Paul is speaking about his apostleship, as though this doesn't apply to anybody else, he shifts their attention from saying all of those things to then moving off into the priority of the gospel himself. Now, you've got to remember that

Paul is speaking in an age when there is no social benefit, nobody has a sense of entitlement, and even if they did, living under Rome, where there were certain benefits and money was up for grabs in different ways, and you only have to read, like, Edward Gibbon, the declining for the Roman Empire, or there's a guy's name who I can't pronounce, but who wrote specifically on money and finance within the early church in early Christianity. And one of the things that he points out that the state, the Roman state became so bloated with what it offered, that people became so reliant on the state, so reliant on the Roman Empire, that that was one of the things that brought the empire down, that people just didn't want to work, they just wanted to claim benefits. We think that's a modern day problem, it was a problem in the Roman Empire, the sense of entitlement and unwillingness to, you know, no, I need to do something. So, when Paul is writing this, he is writing it in that kind of scenario and framework, where poverty is high, but so are some Christians, which are rich. You get that in the book of James, and it's clear from other parts of scripture that that is the case. So, when he starts speaking about, well, isn't it not right that gospel ministers get paid for what they do, you know, some people in the congregation are not happy with that, okay? Some people in the congregation are not happy with Paul even mentioning that, but then he very gently says, oh, and by the way, I'm not writing these things so that you start giving me some money. He makes that very, very clear. But then what he does is, as he shifts your attention away from the apostleship, rights and responsibilities, the laws that God has actually laid down, because this is what he says in verse nine, if we just read it together, or I'll read it to you. So, verse nine says, 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? No. Verse 10, does he not speak entirely for our sake? The point here that Paul is making is that as oxen tread out the grain, they're not muzzled, which means they get to eat some of the grain that they tread out. In other words, they make a living off their work. They make a living off their work. And Paul is saying that God has written this law down, not for the sake of oxen, but actually for the sake of gospel ministers, because God's anticipating, or God knows in his knowledge, of course, that one of the problems in a community is that why should we pay people to proclaim the gospel? Okay, that can happen. And that's what's happening here. Now, all of that sounds, oh, this seems like a hard lesson to learn until you get to verse 12. And Paul seems to turn everything on its head. So, we're going to look at this under just a few simple headings. Here's the first one, defending the rights that God has given. Okay, defending the rights that God has given. Paul is clearly defensive about his apostleship, because his apostleship has been brought into question by some people, who they are. He doesn't mention at this point, but it's clearly identified that some people, perhaps even in the Corinthian church, are not considering Paul to be an apostle like the other apostles. Now, one of the ways that he defends this is by saying, have I not seen Jesus Christ? Have I not seen Jesus Lord? There are two qualifications to be an apostle. There are only two, but they're pretty important. The first qualification is that you have to have seen Jesus. That's qualification number one. Now, that doesn't mean that if you did see Jesus in the flesh, that you automatically become an apostle, because you need the second qualification. And the second qualification is that you've got to be able to do the works that

Jesus did, like Jesus did them. And that particular gift was given to the first apostles. That's what made them apostles. So when Paul defends himself here, he's using a very clear defensive argument.

[12 : 41] Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Okay, because that there is a definitive mark of what it means to be an apostle, as well as to do the works of Jesus. But then he moves on very quickly, you'll notice, by calling the Corinthian Christians his workmanship. He says to the church, well, are you not my workmanship?

In other words, he's saying, you know, if you bring my apostleship into question, and yet you have become believing Christians by me proclaiming the gospel to you, what does that say about your conversion?

If you're bringing me into question, you're almost bringing yourself into question at the same time, because you're my workmanship. And this is what he's saying at the end of verse one, that they are Christians converted through Paul proclaiming the gospel to them. And so to question Paul is almost to question their own validity as believing Christians, Christians in the Lord. But then he says, verse two, that they are his seal. Now, when you put a seal on something in this period of time, it's really important for people who can't read or write, because at least they can understand the seal. So if you imagine getting a letter from someone, and you couldn't read or write, but you understood that the seal on it was a seal of royalty, of great importance, then you would understand that that letter, though I can't read it, is an important letter. Paul is saying that these Christians themselves in the church are his seal of his apostleship. In other words, they're the ones that give witness and validity almost to him being apostle amongst them. They belong to God through the work that Paul did amongst them. So bring it into question, if you will. But what does that say about your own conversion? Paul then has to defend the right of material support. And the way that he defends the right of material support is by pointing out to the congregation that these aren't rights that

I've made up as an apostle. These are rights that are handed down to us by God. Look at the oxen. The oxen is instructed, or God instructs us concerning the oxen, not to muzzle him up, because if we did, he wouldn't get any food from the work that he does. And it's not the oxen that God is concerned about. So Paul is trying to defend here the right for gospel ministers to receive an income from proclaiming the gospel. Not payment for what they do, but rather being supported by the church so that they are free to dedicate their life to prayer and to the proclamation of the word.

He even goes as far to say that if he were married, he would be allowed to take along, verse 5, a believing wife. Meaning that not only could he expect support for himself, but he could expect support for his believing wife while he's out and about, just like Peter did. You know, Peter being an apostle, being a disciple who is married, we get an indication of that in the gospels, where Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law. So we know he's a married man. And of course, so we have a married man, okay, and he's given up fishing, the source of his income, to do the very thing that God has actually called him to do. And God's instruction to the church concerning people like Peter and Paul, is that if I've called these men aside to do this particular thing, then they're allowed to receive support through what they're actually doing. And so this is the point that Paul is making here.

[16 : 44] These men sow spiritual things among you, verse 11, and therefore have they not the right to receive material blessings in return? If they are used by God to sow spiritual things among you, then they have this right given to them by God to receive material things. This is not a blessing, but this is how God organizes his church so that you can have a supported ministry, a supported ministry. Now that, if the passage finished there, you would only get one view.

You can probably guess what some of you are thinking. You're thinking, man, Daniel's just laid it on the line. Does he want a pay rise or something? I want nothing of the sort. I can, hopefully, that's clear from anything that I've ever said. I'm not after that at all. I'm simply telling you what this says. But here's the thing that I want to point out, that if you left it there, you're going to have some of the congregation will go, yeah, I can see the logic to that.

But I can see that that would be the right thing to do. But then you can have a whole load of other people go, well, hang on a minute. If that's the case, I'll decide what to give, who to give it to, and when to give it. In other words, I'll be the arbiter. I'll be the person who makes those kind of decisions. I'll sort of take it out of God's hands. In other words, I will divvy up what to give. Now, Paul knows that he is dealing with a church that might just think like that. I'll pick and choose what I will support. So at this point, the church, you could say, feels a little bit battered, a little bit. But then Paul does something, which I'm glad that he does, because he puts every minister in his place. And I think every minister has to be put in this place all the time in order to remain in ministry. Nevertheless, you look at verse 12, the tone and the shape of what Paul is saying goes through a massive refocus. And it comes down to this word, nevertheless, we have not made, this is partway through verse 12. 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.

The necessity. Paul's motivation is this, that as a gospel minister, he is never ever allowed, and he should never ever be motivated or encouraged or even come to mind to put an obstacle in the way of the gospel being proclaimed. He does, however, say, verse 14, that, you know, temple priests are supported by the temple. And the Lord commanded that those who work at the, you know, at the altar receive their food from the altar. And those who proclaim the gospel, should make their living by the gospel, verse 14, the end of verse 14. He does say that, but notice now the context in which he's saying it in. In other words, he's saying this, look, if you're a church that doesn't want to give, fine, don't give. If you don't want to give, fine, just, okay, it's up to you. Because you're either going to give willingly or you're not going to give willingly. You're either going to give willingly out of being motivated by God without divvying up the reason to yourself or you're not going to give. Okay, it's fine. But I want you to know that that's not the reason I stand here and proclaim to you the gospel. I don't stand here because I'm paid to do so,

Paul's saying. And all the other apostles and all the other gospel ministers like him should be of the same motivation and attitude. That there shouldn't be anything to stop the gospel from being proclaimed, whether it's in a church that doesn't pay a minister or whether it's in someone who doesn't support a missionary or support anybody else. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is allowed to get in the way of the gospel being proclaimed. And if money is one of those things that gets in the way, then the minister shouldn't be a minister in the first place. Okay, and the church, the church needs to understand that the gospel is way more important than any material thing that they might have hold of. Why? Verse 16. Paul says, because necessity is laid upon me.

[21 : 26] Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel. There it is. So out of everything else that Paul has said, all these rights and responsibilities and stewardship and pay what you owe, all of that pales into insignificance. Because of the priority that the gospel has over everything else.

You know, I need to pay careful attention to what Paul is saying here. There are other gospel ministers in the congregation here. Barry, Brian's going out into gospel ministry. You know, we need to pay particular attention to this and take it to heart because this is the thing that shapes us.

The priority of our life needs to be this. And the priority of your life needs to be the same. That there should never be an obstacle that prevents us as a church from proclaiming the gospel.

And whatever that obstacle is, it must be overcome as quickly as possible that the gospel be presented, that the gospel be proclaimed. Paul is saying this, that all obstacles must be overcome so that it does not inhibit gospel proclamation. Those who do gospel work should have this kind of attitude.

attitude. Those who do gospel work, even a church at large, should have this type of attitude. And he puts this in the category of faithful stewardship as a responsibility. He says, look, the gospel is something I steward. This gospel is something that I have been given that I have to be responsible with. I have to do something with this. And what I have to do is proclaim it and make sure it's proclaimed and make sure nothing gets in the way of it being proclaimed. And one of those things that could get in the way is, well, you're not supporting me enough. You're not giving me enough money. You can't even cover my travel expenses to get here to preach the gospel to you. That kind of attitude needs to go. And if that kind of attitude ever springs up, that's an obstacle that you can clearly see stops the gospel from being proclaimed. Paul says, if you're a minister, and I take this seriously, if that's the kind of attitude you got, you go. Because you're the obstacle to the gospel being proclaimed. So the issue here, and this is the reason why it's part two in the discipleship program, is to recognize the priority of the gospel over everything. The priority of the gospel, even over the person proclaiming it, being supported. The priority of the gospel over every other responsibility, and over every other priority that we might have. What Paul is saying here is that my responsibility to proclaim the gospel as the church's responsibility to proclaim the gospel must not be secondary to anything else the church does. Okay? Now that doesn't mean, that doesn't mean you proclaim the gospel over here and you do all those other things later. What it means is that whatever you do through the church, in the church, and all the ministries that we have, the gospel has to be proclaimed in all of them. The gospel has to have first place in all of them. The gospel has to be proclaimed. Because if it isn't, there's an obstacle in the way of that happening. And that has to stop.

[25 : 13] That has to be overcome. And so as people are transformed, Paul's saying, by the work of the gospel, God will supply the church's needs in that way. So don't worry about it. God's going to take care of it.

But don't allow those things to become obstacles to the gospel being proclaimed in the first place. Paul says, I am obligated. I am filled with the necessity which is laid upon me to preach the gospel whether I benefit or not. As a church, we need to make sure the gospel is proclaimed whether we benefit as a church or not. However much it might cost us to do it, however little it might cost us to do it.

The fact is, is what obstacles get in the way of the gospel being proclaimed. Whatever they are, says Paul, they have to go. Now they may not have to go far. They may just have to drop down the list.

Okay, they may not have to go all together, but they do have to drop down from the first position that they hold. So Paul's saying this, necessity is laid upon me. And it's laid upon me in such a way that I now recognize that the gospel should always make its way to the top. And everything else should filter down through into its proper place. The gospel has to have its proper place.

So he gets to the point of priority change. And this is very short, but so important. Now some of you have heard the saying that you can take the person out of the city, but you can't take the city out of the person, or something like that.

[26 : 56] But sometimes the city has to be taking out the person. Okay, you can take the person out of the city, but you can't take the city out of the person. And what Paul is saying here, well hang on a minute, sometimes the city has to leave the person.

When you speak about priority, and you speak about how do we get priority change, one of the things that will not cause it is by taking a person out of the city, by changing the scenery, by changing the circumstances.

Because if the city is still in them, then so is the priorities of the city still in them. And this is one of the things that we struggle with as a church, not just us as a church, but as a church generally speaking, that when the church tries to go through a priority change, it begins with externals.

Let's change a few things on the outside. But actually Paul is saying, the issue here is not getting the man out of the city, it's getting the city out of the man. Okay, it's not getting the Christian in a different set of circumstances, it's getting what's in the Christian out of them.

Those old ways. So the Corinthian church may have come out of the world into the body of Christ, but it seems that the world has not yet been taken out of them.

[28 : 17] In other words, they're still going back to that. And that's one of the struggles that Paul has with priorities in the Corinthian church. Okay, they've come out of the world by the grace of God, but the world has not yet come all the way out of them.

They've not come out of the world in that they're in a different location. They're no longer of the world's order. They're no longer of the world's system. They live under grace, under the grace of God.

But it seems that the world is not yet quite out of them. And that's the problem. And that's how priorities changes. It's not about changing the things externally to you.

It's about changing us on the inside out. And that's gospel transformation. The gospel always works from the inside out. It always purifies that way rather than externally.

So here's the sort of exhortation then as we close. We're all confronted with the same challenge, regardless of who we are, whether we're the pastor of the church, the youth worker of the church, someone eventually going into ministry.

[29 : 22] It doesn't matter who we are. We're all confronted with the same challenge. And the challenge is this. Am I out of the world? And is the world out of me? Am I out of the world?

It's systems, it's orders, it's priorities. And is the world's systems and orders priorities out of me? That's the challenge that we're all confronted with this evening.

I may be in a new community of people. My scenery may have changed. But I've brought a whole lot with me in this new community. And everything that I've brought with me is in me.

And that needs to go. I should have left that behind. If the gospel is going to take priority, then a priority change needs to happen. And this, Paul says, is how it happens.

It's not about just a person leaving the world, but it's about the world leaving a person. The other thing that we must be convinced about is that the necessity of the gospel, that the necessity is laid upon Paul.

[30 : 21] He feels the full conviction of why the gospel must be preached to every man, woman, boy, and girl, without exception. He's not content with the gospel taking any place apart from first place.

He is convicted deep in his heart that no obstacle should ever come in place of, in the way of the gospel being proclaimed.

And the way that he does that is by beginning with himself. And the Corinthians must do the same. Those who feel gospel conviction feel the necessity of the gospel laid upon them in first place.

Being a faithful steward, then, being a faithful steward, says Paul, is recognizing that you have a responsibility before God to handle what he has given you very, very carefully.

Okay? It needs to be in first place all the time. So wherever you are, and whenever you are there, the gospel should always rise to the top.

[31 : 30] Or it should always be at the top before you get there. And you've often heard me say that, you know, Christians are to make commitments in a world that changes so that we don't change along with the world.

Okay? Okay? We make commitments and we stick to them so that we don't change in a world that is constantly changing. That's how you prioritize the gospel above all things.

That's how it stays at the top when there are many, many things that can put it further down the list. We don't want obstacles in front of the thing that God has given us to get rid of obstacles.

So, with this I'll finish. A final point, as it were. God has to take the person out of the world. And God has to take the world out of the person.

And the way that he does this is through the gospel. Now, it takes time. It's true that there is a definitive moment of sanctification and justification where we become Christ's.

[32 : 36] Where we become God's. So, regardless of how sinful we can be when we're Christians, it can never be taken away from us that we're still God's. Okay? I can sin as a Christian now, which is all the worst, but I can never be separated from God.

But that sin, it needs to come out of me. That worldliness needs to come out of me. I may have been taken out of all of that by God definitively. But at the same time, that transformation that needs to happen needs to continually happen through the whole of my life, through the whole of all of our lives.

Why? Because if it doesn't, they may just be the very obstacles that get in the way that stop us from proclaiming the gospel and keeping it first. If we're going to be a people like Paul, who considers the priority of the gospel, we first need to be convicted of the gospel.

That the gospel deserves its place. That the gospel deserves first place amongst every other priority in the world. We must be convinced that the gospel comes first because it is first.

We must be convinced that the gospel have first place because it rightfully deserves to have first place. In other words, it shouldn't take any other position because it cannot in its quality of what it actually achieves on earth.

[34 : 05] So, in short, necessity is laid upon us to overcome every obstacle that we come up against, personally or as a church, so that we make sure the gospel is proclaimed.

Necessity is laid upon us so that that happens. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.