

Sermon 29: 1 Corinthians 9:1-14: Paul's rights

OUTLINE

Rights as an apostle
Rights given by God
Rights refused by Paul

INTRODUCTION

We come to what I think is one of the most challenging chapters in the NT for a singleminded commitment to the gospel. There are times when we think we are doing well in living for God. We might pat ourselves on the back for praying regularly and having our quiet times for a month. We might think that we have gone above and beyond when we have had guests in our house for more than a whole week. We might think ourselves generous when we give above a tithe. We think that we have fulfilled the great commission if we have shared the gospel with an unbeliever in the last six months. We are too easily satisfied with our levels of commitment and sacrifice and it is good for us to be challenged by Paul's commitment to the gospel. You can think you are doing well in your running, or in playing guitar, or in your writing, or in how you are preaching, and then you see someone who is a true master, someone who is well ahead of you and you realize how apathetic and content you have become and feel more determined to apply yourself. That is the feeling I get as we come to 1 Cor. 9.

Paul you will remember has been talking about the problem of meat offered to idols. He is going to deal with two aspects of it, the problems of Christians having intimate associations with idolatry which he will deal with in chapter 10; and how those who claim to have knowledge have been living in a loveless fashion and causing the weak to stumble into idolatry. Paul has been leaning hard on those who claim to have knowledge getting them to consider the knowledge of the weak; and the value of the weak to Christ. He ended the last chapter talking about what Jesus has done for His church, how far Jesus is willing to go to save and serve sinners, and how this led to a big statement by Paul, 8:13, 'Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.' Against those with so called knowledge who were insisting upon their rights Paul speaks about Christ who gave up His rights, and of himself who is following Christ's example. This leads to chapter 9 which is all about our rights and laying them down in service of others.

We have experienced a boom in human rights. The human rights movement is a product of Christianity's influence upon western thought. Friedrich Nietzsche, no friend of Christianity wrote, 'Another Christian concept, no less crazy: the concept of equality of souls before God. This concept furnishes the prototype of all theories of equal rights.' God has given us certain freedoms that should be protected. Sadly without God in the picture and His truth to guide us these freedoms have taken on a life of their own and they have become unrecognizable. Today we are seeing human rights without God resulting in the right to abortion; the right to kill the elderly and sick; the right to same sex marriage, etc. Trying to obey God's command to love your neighbor without the guiding light of God's truth leads to these sorts of abuses. An abuse the Corinthians were struggling with was the issue of demanding rights and not recognizing their responsibilities. Rights and responsibilities go hand in hand. God has given us rights so that we are free to serve Him, free to do what we are

made for; not free from all obligation and to pursue Godless autonomy. Freedom in the Bible is not so much freedom 'from' but freedom 'for'. Freedom of religion does not exist to empower Satanism and false belief, but to ensure your freedom of conscience to give your worship to God freely. Paul is going to show how rights cannot be insisted upon as a cover for selfishness and lovelessness that results in another's harm. Rather he is going to show from his own example, which is an imitation of Christ; that curtailing our rights as we allow gospel priorities to dictate our behavior, is the best way.

The chapter before us seems like a radical topic change but it is not, it is all linked to rights laid down in a singleminded devotion to the gospel, as Christ laid down His rights for us. Today we want to look at v1-14. Paul really only has one point to make, he spends a lot of time establishing his right to compensation for his ministry in order to demonstrate giving up that right in service to others. We will divide this section up into 3 parts, his rights as an apostle; these rights as given by God in the law; and these rights given up in service of the gospel.

Rights as an apostle

V1-2, 'Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? ² 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.' Before Paul will talk about giving up his rights, he first spends some time establishing his rights. He begins doing this by asking for rhetorical questions all with the implied answer of 'yes.' Is Paul free? Yes, he is free in a social sense in that he has full Roman citizenship, but more than that he is free in Christ. Paul treasures his freedom in Christ, Gal. 5:1, 'For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.' This freedom means freedom from God's judgement upon sin, for Christ has taken our punishment. This freedom means freedom from the dominion of satan, for we are no longer a thrall of his but we belong to Christ as citizens of His kingdom. This means freedom from our past enslavement to sin, we have the Spirit within and a new heart that enables us to obey God and put sin to death. We have freedom from the OT ceremonial and civil laws and should not allow ourselves to be made slaves to others legalistic interpretations of these laws. Paul will go on to show how though he has freedom, he gives up these freedoms to serve in the gospel. Paul will return to this matter in a later message, the rest of our section today focuses on an apostle's right to compensation.

Paul sets out proving that he is an apostle, not so much because there were some challenging his apostleship, that will be the case in 2 Corinthians. No, rather he is establishing that he is an apostle to show that he is entitled to compensation for his ministry. The question regarding seeing Jesus is because this was a basic qualification for anyone to become an apostle. Only those who had seen the resurrected Christ and were personally appointed by Christ could be apostles, this is one of the reasons why there can be no more apostles in this sense today. In v2 he points out that even if others would want to dispute that he is an apostle the Corinthians cannot. He planted the church in Corinth after all and they are a seal of his apostleship. A seal is a legal ratification. Paul is their spiritual parent, and they are the proof.

V3-6, 'This is my defense to those who would examine me. ⁴ Do we not have the right to eat and drink? ⁵ Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶ Or is it only

Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?’ Paul is going to show that he as an apostle is going to be giving up his rights, but first he establishes that he has rights as an apostle in the first place. V3 mentions his defense, v4-6 lay out the things that he is entitled to. As an apostle Paul has the right to food and drink, at least. Even if you limit what an apostle would be entitled to based on Christ’s first commissioning of the 12 to the lost sheep of the house of Israel where they were to take no money bag, but could receive basic hospitality, this is at least true for Paul. Paul likewise has the right to get married, like Peter and take his wife along with him and receive hospitality and provision for he and his wife. The Greek is literally ‘sister wife’ indicating that she is a fellow believer. A key matter is raised in v6 where Paul talks about how he and Barnabas work with their own hands, doing two jobs where the other apostles are free from these double duties.

Let me linger on this for a moment. In the first century there would have been a number of travelling teachers who mooched off of wealthy patrons, who gathered the rich around themselves and lived the good life. Paul made deliberate efforts to separate himself from any resemblance to this practice by working with his hands. You will remember that Paul spoke about the ways in which he suffered in the ministry in 4:9-13, there he includes as a mark of his suffering, ‘we labor, working with our own hands.’ This was no small inconvenience if Paul must list it. Paul we know was a tentmaker which would have possibly included leather work and being a tanner. This was hard and physical work that would have been physically demanding. Paul speaks about this double labor to the Ephesians elders where he reveals that he provided not only for himself but his travelling companions, Acts 20:34, ‘You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me.’ To the Thessalonians he points out that he adopted this practice as an example to encourage people to work hard and not be parasites, 2 Thess. 3:7-10, ‘For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. ⁹ It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.’ Paul wanted to model hard work and earning our own living to these new churches.

One of the realities you and I would not fully appreciate is how embarrassing Paul’s manual labor would have been for the Corinthians. ‘Cicero (*De officiis* 1.42) remarks, “Unbecoming to a gentlemen, too, and vulgar are the means of livelihood of all hired workmen whom we pay for mere manual labor, not for artistic skill; for in their case, the very wage they receive is a pledge of their slavery... . And all mechanics [craftsmen], too, are engaged in vulgar trades, for no workshop can have anything liberal [genteel] about it.” Cicero regards working with one’s hands to be a dirty business that coarsens body, soul, and manners. He calls craftsmen “the dogs of the city” (*Pro Flacco* 18). Civilized existence, he thought, required leisure. Naturally, only those belonging to the propertied upper class, having tenants and plenty of slaves to do all the work, could afford to live out this view (see de Ste. Croix 1981: 112–204). Lucian (*Somnium* [*The Dream*] 9) shares the negative estimate of workmen: you are, as a laborer, “personally inconspicuous, getting meagre and illiberal returns, humble-witted, an insignificant figure in public, neither sought by your friends nor feared by your enemies nor envied by your fellow citizens—nothing but just a labourer, one of the swarming rabble, ever cringing to the man above, ... a man

who has naught but his hands, a man who lives by his hands.”¹ Paul dignified physical labor, as did Christ who was a carpenter. Paul’s example breaks down the biases that look down on physical labor, it is a good a fulfilling thing, and can be done to the glory of God. The Corinthians would probably have been a bit embarrassed about Paul as a laborer as well as a non-rich teacher. It would be expected that someone of such noble abilities and station should be upper class and bear all the trappings of being part of the upper classes, Paul had no such pretensions, and he did this on purpose, for the sake of the gospel. Personal comfort and public regard were second to a much higher cause, something more important, namely the gospel.

Paul continues bringing in arguments from reason/nature to prove the point that a worker is worthy of his wages, v7, ‘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?’ Soldiers don’t pay for the privilege of fighting they receive rations and accommodations and a stipend; those who plant a vineyard benefits from the yield of their work from the vines they planted; and those with flocks at least get some of the milk from the flock. Remember all of this is prove he has the right so that he can put it aside.

Rights given by God

V8, ‘Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same?’ Paul moves in typical style from an argument from reason to an argument from authority quoting from God’s word to show that even God says that those who work should receive compensation for their work. V9-10, ‘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? ¹⁰ Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop.’ This is a verse of great interest to those who are interested in how the OT applies in the NT, especially the OT law. There are Theonomists who take a maximalist reading and think that Paul is leading us to think that every law of the OT should have some NT counterpart applied to governments today. They would take Paul’s method here as permission to try and translate every law of the OT into some NT equivalent which governments should implement. I do not want to take us too far off track pursuing this matter. I think that Theonomy does not properly understand the purpose of the Mosaic law and thinks that it is normative for government today, they are mistaken. That aside this does not mean everything in the law is irrelevant and not helpful for us. Paul demonstrates that Deut. 25:4 is based on God’s good character, that it agrees with the nature of the law as a good gift that benefits man, and he points us to a principle which applies in this situation. He makes an argument from the lesser to the greater. If an ox is allowed to eat what it is treading while it works, how much more so can a minister of the gospel receive physical compensation from those he ministers to.

Firstly, please appreciate that the Bible encourages kindness towards animals. As Prov. 12:10 says, ‘Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.’ This is not seen to be incompatible with the use of animals in sacrifice, for food and as tools of labor. If you have animals you are to regard their welfare, God cares for His creation and so should you.

1 David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 418.

We should teach our children not to be cruel to animals, to harm them, needlessly tease them, or abuse them in any way. They are not human beings, they are not made in the image of God, but they are not to be neglected.

Secondly, Paul makes the case that it is right that those who minister the word are paid for doing so. He labors this point further by pointing out the Corinthians obligation to himself, v11-12a, 'If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? ¹² If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?' The others that have likely benefitted from the Corinthians would likely include Apollos who had ministered in Corinth.

Now jump with me to v13-14 where Paul adds two more examples of those who benefit from the fruits of their work, '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? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.' Paul talks about two aspects of temple life where those who work in the temple benefit from their ministrations. He ends all of this talk about what right a minister has quoting the authority and command of Christ. Which command? Paul alludes to it in 1 Tim. 5:17-18, 'Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." That last quote is from Jesus in Luke 10:7.

Now forgive me all this talk about the ministers salary, trust me when I say that I am more uncomfortable talking about it that you are. But Paul has been insistent on establishing this right and proving it is a right beyond all dispute. Why, so that he can show that he is willing to give up this right for the same of the gospel.

Rights refused by Paul

Go back with me to the second half of v12 which I skipped over, '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 Corinthians with so called knowledge wrongly think that they have the right to eat meat offered to idols in deeply religious settings. They are wrong and Paul will show them that they are participating with demons in the next chapter. But right now Paul is showing them that they are thinking in a selfish and not a loveless fashion and is trying to help them adopt a loving way of thinking that will solve so many of their problems. To go around demanding our rights is not how Christ has called us to live the Christian life. We are to imitate His sacrificial service in laying down our rights to benefit others especially by bringing them the gospel.

I began by saying that this is one of the most challenging passages for a singleminded commitment to the gospel, well here is the first way in which this comes to the foreground. After such long argumentation and quoting from all sorts of authorities that a worker is worthy of his wages, you would expect Paul to send around the offering basket and take up an offering, but he does the opposite. Life would be so much easier for Paul if he would take money from all the churches that he visited. He would not have to tire himself out working two jobs, one being very physical. He would not have to lose respect by having a manual job but could have people respect him and not look down their noses at

him. But his mind is so set upon the gospel and others getting it, that anything that might detract from it is removed, and even if it means any amount of suffering, he does not care. Here is a man who suffers all things so that the gospel goes forward, all of life is deliberately contrived to optimize the gospel for others. Money, time, physical labor, reputation, sleep, marriage, persecution, freedom, justice, he endures the loss of them all, so that some might be saved. When was the last time you suffered anything for the gospel? When was the last time you prioritized the needs of others over your own comforts and rights? I can imagine someone wanting to say, 'Yes, Nick but, we must be balanced, we can't be blind to injustice,' I am not going to echo those sentiments because our own hearts whisper those things to us already, the thing that is not natural to our self-preserving hearts is this willingness to lay down our lives for others.

Do the realities of heaven and hell, the value of a soul, the glory of God, and the necessity of others hearing the gospel guide your daily decision making? Do these truths pressure and shape your life? Are they so much more important to you than present comforts that are imperfect? We are not all called to be an apostle like Paul with so evident a life given to the gospel, but each one of us has to live in light of these same realities. Are you in self-preservation mode where you are justifying having what is rightfully yours or are you in this gospel mode? I call it a gospel mode because friends this is not a call to do hard things for their own sake. This is a reminder that we have been saved through Jesus giving up His rights so that we might benefit; this is a reminder that unless there are people like Paul who go out of their way to put themselves out others will not hear. There is a mode of selfish living which can be justified on paper but does no one but yourself any good. Paul has more to say on this matter, so before next week read over this chapter and think about what a gospel focused life looks like. Pray that God will challenge and change us all that we might be more effective in our calling to spread the gospel.