

Sermon 30: 1 Corinthians 9:15-18: Paul's motivation

OUTLINE

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Remuneration

INTRODUCTION

The modern study of motivation is the study of why we do what we do, and the direction, intensity and persistence with which we do it. We are generally entranced by motivated people. We will watch documentaries and stand amazed at the single minded focus that an Olympic athlete; an actor; someone trying to break a world record might have. I think because we are all functioning on a lower energy level of motivation those who are driven and dedicated and sacrificial as they pursue their goals stand out for us. As Christians when we read biographies of pioneer missionaries or martyrs our hearts are stirred, and we feel challenged and convicted because we realize our own focus and dedication has drifted. Today we come face to face with a uniquely motivated individual, the apostle Paul. We said last week that this chapter stands out as one of the most challenging chapters in the Bible when it comes to a gospel centered life. In our last message we looked at Paul spelling out the rights that an apostle has, all to show how a singleminded dedication to the gospel made him willing to forego all rights in service to others hearing the gospel. Today we continue looking at Paul but here he focuses us in on his motivation, why he does what he does, namely giving up his rights as he spreads the gospel, and the direction, intensity and persistence with which he does it. Once again we will be challenged as we see what a life focused on the gospel looks like. Today we will divide our section up into three parts, in v15 we will see Paul's declaration; then in v16-17 we will see Paul's motivation; and then in v18 we will see Paul's remuneration.

Declaration

V15, '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.' Paul you will remember is talking about meat offered to idols. He is correcting those with so called knowledge who think they have certain rights when it comes to eating food offered to idols. He will show them in chapter 10 that their knowledge is incomplete and that certain types of eating embroil them in the demonic. Here in chapters 8-9 he is showing how love has to guide us not an insistence upon our rights, and the whole of chapter 9 is Paul using himself as an example in how in service of the gospel one can serve others rather than be demanding. V15 opens then with a repeat of something Paul has already said in v12b, '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.' What rights is Paul talking about? Paul has mentioned his freedom; Paul spoke about marriage and taking along a believing wife which he has given up for the gospel; Paul has been speaking a lot about the rights of a workman being worthy of his wages and receiving material gains from his labours. Paul also makes clear that his writing about these things is not him hinting at needing or wanting money. Paul is not insinuating that they give him money.

It is at this point that Paul makes a big declaration, 'For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting.' Paul has something worth dying for. He would rather die than give up preaching the gospel for free. The word for boast here is not negative but rhetorical in use. What some would call folly, Paul delights and rejoices in. Where some would think him mad for not taking the basic right to wages for his work, Paul would rather die than charge for preaching the gospel. Now let's be clear, Paul is not saying it is sinful for preachers of the gospel to live by the gospel, he has spent the first 14 verses of this chapter proving that this is a legitimate right established by the word of God and by Christ. Nor does he grudge the other apostles who are supported in the work of the ministry and utilizing their right to marry and take along their wives when they travel for ministry. Why is this his boast? What is motivating Paul? It can appear that Paul is unnecessarily making his own life hard. Is Paul motivated by a sense of guilt from his past that he is trying to pay in pain for the bad things he did to the church? Is Paul a tragic poet with an artistic soul who feels that a self-afflicting gesture is his costly and ironically fitting tribute to the gospel? Paul who has been freely saved; to preach about the free grace of God; which is offered in the free offer of the gospel to all sinners; a message of a gift of redemption that God has freely provided through the work of Christ on our behalf; a salvation which is received freely, without payment, by faith; and this salvation sets sinners free from sin and to serve God, will not charge for this honor, if anything he would pay to do it. How could he reduce the honor of preaching the gospel of free grace to a monetary transaction and a reimbursement for services rendered? We have already spoken about the wandering teachers who would leech off their students that Paul wants no associations with. Paul made much of this aspect of his testimony in his final farewell to the Ephesian elders, Acts 20:33-35, 'I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.''' Here and with the Thessalonians he wanted to show a life of hard work as the proper way for a Christian to live. But as someone else put it, it appears as if Paul is wanting to avoid any idea that preaching the gospel is a job done for a salary but is rather a calling. Paul also no doubt wants to preach free of charge so that he will preach to all not only those who can afford him; and he preaches freely so that he does not have to tickle the ears of any patrons.

Those who ate meat offered to idols wanted to dispute their right to eat insisting that it was their due to eat, that it was proper, that it was just. Here Paul is pushing back saying think about the gospel of free grace. God did not save you because it was your right, because you were due to be saved, that it was just and right that God saved them. No, the gospel turns our selfish way of thinking on its head. It steals the wind from out of any sails that wants to insist on what is our by right. The only thing that is ours by right is judgement. God has not dealt with us on the basis of giving us what we deserve, but rather He has dealt with us according to what we do not deserve. If God insisted on His rights, He would have judged you; if Jesus had insisted on His rights He would have stayed in heaven and enjoyed the worship of angels not the slander of the crowds and murder on the cross. Paul cannot go around with a mindset that says, I am worthy of payment, I better get what I deserve, and neither should those who insist on their rights to the harm of their brothers do it either. Paul would rather

die than contradict the gospel with such an attitude. No Christian should have a mercenary mindset.

Motivation

V16-17, '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! ¹⁷ For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship.' At the mention of the word boasting Paul offers some clarification. Here he clarifies that the gospel excludes boasting, and that he does not preach for personal glory, but the gospel by virtue of what it is and who has appointed him to the task necessitates his preaching of it. Let's consider that first point, that the gospel excludes boasting. Some might think that Paul is not in it for the money, but maybe some would want to accuse him of being in it for the fame. Paul here clarifies that the gospel excludes the self-promoting boasting that goes with shame, in fact it excludes all boasting. Just think about it. The gospel is for sinners not righteous people, and all are sinners, therefore all need the gospel. The gospel is not for upper class and not lower class. The gospel is not for clever people alone but all people. The gospel is not a tool of colonialism that enables certain races to retain power. The gospel is not a tool of patriarchalism that is built on the idea that men are superior to women. Anyone who has thought to use it to hold it over another person is absolutely blind to what the gospel is really all about. So the Corinthians who insist that gospel entitles them to exercise freedoms as they run rough shod over others causing them to sin, goes completely contrary to the nature of the gospel. One exalting themselves over another, one having a greater esteem and the right to look down and mistreat another, one selfishly taking what is theirs no matter how it impacts others. To live in such a way is to be a contradiction to the gospel which makes boasting impossible.

Paul personally cannot boast. He was a Pharisee who was trying to earn his way into God's favour by keeping the law. He was an enemy and persecutor of the church. He was literally trying to draw people away from Jesus. Jesus came to him when Paul was warring against Him. Christ opened his eyes, drew him out of his folly and lies. Paul was then put into service though the least of all the apostles. He was given office and authority and responsibility given the special task of being the apostle to the Gentiles. When he opens his mouth and speaks as a Christian he is saying that he is a sinner saved by grace. When he speaks the message of free grace inviting sinners of all stripes to be saved any pretense of being better than others must disappear. Any pride that he might feel for his role is undercut as the very words he speaks point to God as worthy not him. So Paul is not using the preaching of the gospel as a way of self-promotion, any who do so are insulting what the gospel stands for. Paul is showing how he dare not, cannot promote himself with the gospel, therefore those who push their own agendas and pursue their own desires in the name of gospel liberty should not do so either. A message of selfless love cannot promote a life of selfishness.

Why then does Paul preach and for free? 'For necessity is laid upon me.' Paul is not doing it for the money; he is not doing it for the fame. Then why does he do it? Paul brings in the strongest language here to talk about his motivation for preaching the gospel. As we scour Paul's letters we get a sense of what it is that is making it necessary that he open his mouth and that he live a selfless life being poured out for others. An obvious reason is gratitude, 1 Tim. 1:15, 'The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came

into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.’ Paul counts himself as the least worthy person, as the greatest sinner, and yet Jesus came into this world of sin and pain; He came to seek and save, and to die for the worst like Paul.

Yes, no doubt Paul would be driven by a sense of personal gratitude, but Paul is also driven by the wonderful goodness of the good news and its amazing power to save, Rom. 1:16-17, ‘For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.’¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” That language of not ashamed is underselling Paul’s overwhelmed soul who wants to shout from the rooftops that any sinner can be saved not by works but by faith, not by their own righteousness but by a righteousness that God gifts to those who believe. The news is so good he can’t keep his mouth shut.

But his motivation is not only one of joy, this is a man who lives on the inside of the truths of the gospel. He sees sinners in their need and He feels the love that Christ has for His church. So in 2 Cor. 5:14 he says ‘For the love of Christ controls us.’ He is under a compulsion driven by the love of Christ for His church. This drives him to preach with tears and to implore sinners to be saved, 5:20, ‘Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.’ But Paul is also compelled by the terrors of hell and very real judgement that sinners must face on the last day. 2 Cor. 5:10-11a, ‘For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.’ All of these could explain what Paul means by necessity. And we must remember that he is highlighting how these truths of the gospel compel a life that seeks to glory God and benefit others, in order to convict those who claim to have knowledge to live a life consistent with the gospel.

But Paul not only preaches freely from all sorts of desires, there is likewise an obligation to preach upon him. ‘Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.’ Paul is speaking of what those in the ministry would identify as an official call. Paul unlike your regular pastor had a calling to be an apostle. In Gal. 1:15-16 he writes of himself like the prophet Jeremiah, ‘But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace,’¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone.’ ‘The great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon rightly said that any true gospel-called minister knows what Paul is talking about. He writes,

If a man be truly called of God to ministry, I will defy him to withhold himself from it. A man who has really within him the inspiration of the Holy Ghost calling him to preach cannot help it. He must preach. As fire within the bones, so will that influence be until it blazes forth. Friends may check him, foes criticize him, despisers sneer at him, the man is indomitable. He must preach if he has the call of heaven. (“Preach the Gospel,” 267)

Faithful preachers preach the gospel of Jesus Christ whether paid or not. They must. They are under a divine mandate, spiritual obligation, and calling.’¹ This is always a test to see if someone has a call to ministry on their lives. Will they preach whether recognized or not; whether they are paid or not; even whether

1 Daniel L. Akin, [“The Gospel above All \(1 Corinthians 9:1-18\).”](#) in *Exalting Jesus in 1 Corinthians*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Brentwood, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2023), 182.

they are met with acceptance and acclaim or not? Those who feel a call to preach are driven and can't not preach.

Paul delights to preach, can think of no greater joy than to preach, he willingly embraces all that goes with preaching as we have stressed above. But even if he were not willing he must still do his duty, v17, 'For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship.'

Firstly, we should appreciate that the Christian life and definition of freedom is the freedom to have responsibility and service. A steward is a head butler, and this is the function Paul sees himself fulfilling in the church. The Christian life for Paul is not one of footloose and fancy free, but as someone who is the Lord's slave who takes orders and who serves.

Secondly, as we apply this to those who are eating idol feasts at their brothers expense, we see Paul talking about doing the right thing and giving up your rights because you want to; and even when those emotions aren't there driving and motivating you to do the right things and serve; then you are still obliged and it is your duty. God is merciful and has made us to be motivated by an inner impulse through a fullness of emotions. But having sinful and inconsistent hearts we cannot trust our emotions, they will fail us. Even as you came to church today, as you have been confronted with the truth of Christ in the glory of His grace have your hearts melted as they should or have you been hard. Likewise when it comes to gladly loving others and serving them. Like Paul we will experience a compulsion that drives us, an overflowing heart that we cannot silence and nothing can hold us back. But even when we aren't feeling it, we must still do the right thing. I have spoken to someone who was under church discipline and in sin, and he told me that he was waiting for him to want to repent of his sins. We must be careful in our therapeutic age because we have made our emotions infallible. We don't think of our hearts as broken and able to deceive us, what we feel within is truth and we let it dictate what we do, determine what is right or wrong, even whether God exists or not. And bringing that all back to the matter at hand. What should those who are causing their brother to stumble do? On the one hand they feel like they are doing the right thing and have convinced themselves that they are in the right and that truth is on their side; or should they do the right thing because it is the right thing?

Remuneration

Paul has just mentioned rewards in v17 so again he adds a clarification in v18, '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.' A common motivation for any action is the perceived rewards. Paul has denied the usual incentives that drive people namely money or fame. What then is Paul's reward? With all this talk of reward does Paul have some hidden and atypical selfish motive driving him? Is he idiosyncratic and just selfish in a quirky way? No. His reward for preaching the free offer of the gospel about the free grace of God which is about God's free gift of righteousness in Christ, which is received freely by faith and not by works, and which sets the sinner free. Paul's reward is to preach that gospel freely, without hindrance, without being a stumbling block, without any insistence upon what he thinks he is entitled to. Does this sound odd? It will only sound odd if you are not with Paul inside the logic of the gospel seeing what he sees and feeling what he feels. If you are judging this whole question of who has rights; and shouldn't Paul demand payment from the perspective of the world's concerns. The thing that lies at the center of the

world logic on these matters is man and his happiness. Paul has a different view of things, the gospel has turned it all upside down. God and His glory presented in the gospel lies at the center. Paul cannot go around preaching a gospel of free grace demanding justice, because the gospel is God not giving us what we deserve. Paul we must remember is using this as an illustration that now by extension applies to the situation in Corinth. The gospel saves despised and stupid sinners; Jesus loves the lowly and weak, and so should we by being willing to serve them even if we think they have terrible theology. The gospel serves sinners in their weakness, we should be willing to serve others and put our own desires second. The gospel is God's selflessness serving and saving the selfish from their selfishness to become perfected in the image of God and glorify Him by reflecting that same selflessness in service of others. To speak in the same tones that God speaks to us; to serve in the same way that God served us, to be more conformed to the image of Christ; to serve with a greater fullness in the likeness of Christ, to be conformed to the fellowship of Christ's sufferings as He served the Church, this is Paul's reward. Paul is not a mercenary, he is not in it for what he can get out of it, he will happily suffer in service and count himself blessed and rewarded. This is the heart and attitude that gospel produces. Imagine we applied this in our marriages, to allow the gospel to decide what is fulfilling counting ourselves rich when we have given not when we have received. Or in our parenting, or in our serving in the church, or our neighborhoods. Paul is living what he quoted from Christ to the Ephesian elders, it is more blessed to give than to receive. Let us imitate Paul as he imitates Christ.