

What about My “Rights?”

1 Corinthians 9:12-19

Can you sit down with your Bible and build a case for your rights as a believer? Let’s say that it is an airtight Biblical case, built to your own satisfaction. You are careful enough that your case uses examples from Scripture. Perhaps you can even point to others in Scripture who practiced the behavior you wish to defend. In today’s text, the question will be this: should you use your right to exercise this behavior?

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul has labored to build an airtight case for his rights. But he did so for a reason that we might consider a little strange. Consider the words with which 1 Corinthians 8 concludes: **“Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend [stumble], I will eat no flesh while the world stands, lest I make my brother to offend [stumble].”** As you can see, Paul made much of the brotherhood of believers in the body of Christ, the church. Paul had explained the grave danger facing Christian brothers with the strong words of 1 Corinthians 8:9 and 11. Some of the weaker believers “recoiled from having contact with anything associated with their past paganism. Their consciences were not yet strong enough to allow them to eat idol food without having it pull them back to their former idolatrous activity.”ⁱ

The words of 1 Corinthians 8:13 may strike us as extreme – impossible heights to which no Christian should aspire. But Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 9 is a great lever to move those who seem immovable. He does do to inspire the Corinthian believers to new heights of joyous Christian service. As one author wrote, “By increasing the weight of the right which he voluntarily renounces, he heightens the pressure on Corinthians to follow his authoritative example and act likewise. Authority and imitation are two sides of the same coin.”ⁱⁱ

- In verses 1-6, Paul firmly established his rights and freedoms as an apostle. He mentioned three rights, but he spent the most time on his right to financial support.
- In verse 7, he persuaded his readers using some common sense illustrations of human labors.
- Using even greater persuasion, Paul used the Old Testament Law in verses 8-11 to build his airtight Biblical case for his rights. This is where we left off in the last message. But he uses even more powerful persuasion in today’s text.

Firmly Established Rights – Set Aside, 12-18

¹² **If others be partakers of *this* power over you, *are* not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ.**

Paul used the word [*exousia*], translated twice in verse 12 as the word “power.” This is the same word that Paul used to warn the Corinthian believers in 1 Corinthians 8:9, **“But take heed lest by any means this liberty [*exousia*] of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.”** But instead of insisting on his rights, Paul chose to “suffer” (endure quietly) so that he would cause no hindrance to the Gospel. “Paul refused to accept support from a church that he was in the process of founding, but he had no hesitations about accepting support from churches he had previously founded once he had moved on to other missionary venues (cf. Philippians 4:15-16).”ⁱⁱⁱ

The cultural context of this issue can help us make a relevant application today. Joel White points out that refusing to eat the idol’s meat in the idol ceremonies could hurt a believer’s financial standing. “The consequences of nonparticipation were not merely social in nature. The potential economic costs were also quite high. For instance, refusal to participate in the meetings of the guilds would have likely entailed negative economic consequences for members of the trades. Further, given the structure of Greco-Roman society, in which advancement depended on frequent displays of fealty to benefactors in public settings,

refusal to attend public celebrations might mean an abrupt end to any aspirations of improving one's lot in life."^{iv} So what if refusing to exercise your "rights" was bad for business? If you had to choose to sacrifice a financial profit in order not to cause your brother to stumble, would you choose to do so? Paul chose not to exercise his right – at a considerable financial cost to himself.

✚ Using a Precise Example to Make a Powerful Point

¹³ Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things live *of the things* of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar? ¹⁴ Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel.

The illustration that Paul used in verse 13 must have shocked the Corinthian believers who were "in the know." They were insisting on their liberty to eat meat offered to idols in pagan temples. Paul used an illustration from the Old Testament temple to make his point. By the example of Old Testament Law, he had the right to financial support, but he set aside that right. Surely the Corinthians could do the same with reference to "their right" to meat offered in pagan temples.

✚ Paul's Privileges vs. Paul's Purpose

¹⁵ But I have used none of these things: neither have I written these things, that it should be so done unto me: for *it were* better for me to die, that any man should make my glorying void.

Paul had chosen not to use his rights in order to fulfill His calling. He hasn't yet revealed what his "glorying" or "boast" is, but verse 15 shows how important it was to Paul. Paul felt that it would have been better for him to die, than to have this boast set aside. Paul set aside his privileges in order to have the total freedom to accomplish his purpose. "Because Paul limited himself by refusing to eat something that might cause another to fall, readers might wrongly infer that Paul's freedom was somehow curtailed."^v But this is not the case. Paul was consumed with fulfilling his God-given purpose. He let go of his rights in order that the Gospel of Christ might race ahead with freedom. (This was Paul's fervent prayer request in 2 Thessalonians 3:1.)

✚ Paul's Rights vs. Paul's Reward

But what was Paul's "boast?" What was so important that he chose to set aside his personal rights and privileges? "**¹⁶ For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! ¹⁷ For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me. ¹⁸ What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel.**

Paul gloried in the fact that he preached the Gospel and planted churches without asking for money. He "made the Gospel without charge." Paul explained that he had a duty ("necessity") laid upon him. If he did not discharge his duty ("dispensation of the gospel"), he knew that he would be severely disciplined by the Lord. This is why he would say, "Yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!" But Paul chose to proclaim the Gospel willingly because he was reaching for his reward. This contrast in verse 16-18 is helpful to us. Do you intend to merely live your Christian life out of duty or obey the Lord out of fervent desire? Are you just trying to stay one step ahead of chastening? Or are you passionately reaching for your reward?

A well-worn illustration may be of help to us here. The story is told of a gentlemen who was searching for a driver for his coach. He asked every applicant about their skill by posing this question: "How close to the edge of a cliff can you drive my coach, without going over? Most applicants dutifully demonstrated their skill by driving precariously close to the cliff's edge. But the coachman who was hired drove as far from

the edge as the road would allow. Paul charged the believers at Ephesus: **“See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil”** (Ephesians 5:15-16). We are called to do the same today.

Now we can test whether or not we truly understand where Paul is going with his explanation. If Paul gave up his rights and received no pay, wouldn't that make him a slave?

The Use of Christian Liberty, 19

¹⁹ **For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more.** The word translated “servant” in verse 19 is from the Greek word [*doulos*] meaning “slave.”^{vi} Though Paul had great liberty as a Christian, he made himself a slave unto all. Why? Paul explained, **“that I might gain the more.”** Paul was determined to invest his life in others through the Gospel. This is the Christian use of liberty. He invested the liberty that Christ had given him for the benefit of Christ.

Even if you could make “an airtight, Biblical case” for your rights and privileges, would you be willing to be a slave to others for the sake of Christ? Paul would later write to these same Corinthians: **“I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love.”**⁹ **For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich”** (2 Corinthians 8:8-9). Christ loved you so much that He made Himself a slave for you. He took on your transgressions and sins and went to death on the cross. He did so to free you from the clutches of sin and death. He rose again from the grave to prove that you were a free man or a free woman. Now what will you do with your freedom in Christ?

Robert Plummer wrote, “I doubt if there are many Christians in modern America who could honestly say, ‘If eating meat causes my Christian brother to sin, I will gladly become a vegetarian for the rest of my life.’ Our society is one that values individualism. We do what we want as long as we do not consider it ‘harmful’ to others. We are the ones who define what ‘harmful’ is, and so long as we do not consider our behavior harmful to others, we feel complete freedom to act as we want. Combined with this destructive individualism, conservative Christians (myself included) have so often been in battles for what is ‘right’ that we only have categories in our minds for ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ We hardly know what to do with an action that is ‘permissible’ but should not be done out of gracious concern for another. Modern Christians need to demonstrate a willingness to give up permitted things when other believers’ spiritual health is at stake. Spiritual growth should always take priority over our personal comfort. Paul’s letter forces us to ask ourselves, ‘Are we as zealous as Paul to keep other Christians from sin? Are we willing to give up our freedom or comfort for another’s spiritual good?’^{vii}

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ⁱ John F. MacArthur, 1 Corinthians, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1984, p.194.

ⁱⁱ David E. Garland, 1 Corinthians, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007, p. 403

ⁱⁱⁱ Joel R. White, “Meals In Pagan Temples And Apostolic Finances How Effective Is Paul’s Argument In 1 Corinthians 9:1-23 In The Context Of 1 Corinthians 8-10?” Bulletin for Biblical Research, BBR 23:4 (NA 2013). p. 540-541

^{iv} Joel R. White, p. 539

^v David E. Garland, 1 Corinthians, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007, p. 403

^{vi} “To make one subservient to one’s interests, *cause to be like a slave*, fig. ext. of mng. 1 (Thu. et al.; Hippol., Ref., proem. 2) πᾶσιν ἑμαυτὸν ἐδούλωσα *I have made myself a slave to everyone* 1 Cor 9:19. (William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 260.)

^{vii} Robert L. Plummer, “Eating Idol Meat in Corinth: Enduring Principles from Paul’s Instructions,” SBJT 06:3 (Fall 2002), p. 67

