

4. The Corinthians raised the specific question of eating food sacrificed to idols, and Paul answered that question with a set of principles that apply to all matters of conviction and conscience. Such foods aren't themselves defiled, but this doesn't mean that they can't be defiling to the eater or others who observe him eating. Because the issue isn't the thing or action itself, but how a person regards it, sin and defilement can still result where a weak conscience is involved. And because knowledge must serve love's goal of edification, every Christian must hold his convictions such that they don't impede or stumble the faith of a brother or sister. This obligation pertains equally to the weak and the strong: Both are obligated to act in love toward the other by accepting one another and upholding the other's faith. *But the very nature of the difference between a weak and a strong conscience means that upholding one's own convictions and conscience and those of the other person will look different in practice for the weak and strong.*

- A weaker brother cannot forego his "rights" because his conscience is bound. In the case of the present concern of "idol meats," the weaker brother isn't free to eat or not eat; only abstinence permits him a good conscience.
- In contrast, the strong brother can yield his right to eat without violating his conscience. Unlike the weak one, he knows that eating is a matter of indifference; he is neither better nor worse if he eats or doesn't eat; he is "free" with respect to eating and therefore able to forego his rights for the sake of his brother.

Only the strong brother can set aside his rights and still uphold his own faith and conscience. This is why Paul's exhortation to loving deference is directed toward the mature believer and not the immature one. But, as noted above, the weaker brother does have the same obligation of love when it comes to judging those who differ. He must refrain from condemning the brother who possesses freedom just as the brother whose conscience is free must not look down on the one whose weak conscience is bound. Both are to accept the other and apply themselves to the other's edification.

Paul regarded himself among the strong and so used himself as an example for his counterparts at Corinth. He wasn't requiring of them anything that he didn't require of himself; he'd gladly abstain from eating meat if it meant others would be kept from stumbling (8:13). Of course, the mature among the Corinthians might object that Paul wasn't faced with that necessity; he wasn't in their situation and so it was easy for him to talk about what he *would* do if he were. Some at Corinth would surely take a cynical view of Paul's claim, but others would find in it further justification for questioning his apostleship (cf. 9:3 with 4:1-3): How could a true apostle who understands his authority and rights constrain himself in this way? Apostolic authority and commitment to truth are demonstrated through unyielding argument and action, not vacillation and compromise.

It's impossible to know whether or not Paul anticipated such objections as he wrote; nevertheless, he wisely followed his *stated* commitment to forego his rights with actual *proof* that he'd been doing just that as Christ's apostle. Paul was no mere talker or pontificator; in every arena of his life and ministry, he practiced what he preached. He set aside his rights, not as a coward or a compromiser of truth, but for truth's sake (9:1-27).

- a. Paul set the stage for his defense with a pointed affirmation of his own status in Christ and the rights attached to it. If there were those at Corinth who could boast mature knowledge, understanding, and faith, their boast paled in comparison to his: He was Christ's chosen apostle to the Gentiles; indeed even the "strong" at Corinth were his children in the faith (9:1-2). (It is likely that Paul used his apostleship as the platform for his defense, not only because it highlighted the extent of his authority and rights, but also because he knew it had already become an issue of contention and division among the Corinthians.)
- b. The strong among the Corinthians could claim the rights that come with mature knowledge (8:9). Paul also enjoyed those rights and more, for he could claim the title of *apostle* – the privileged status of one chosen by the Lord Himself and charged with the stewardship of His gospel and Church. If the Corinthians wanted to examine Paul and his life in the light of his demands upon them, he was ready and eager for them to do so. And his answer to them was that, in every arena, he had willingly foregone his rights for the sake of the gospel and its fruitfulness in the Church and the world. He exemplified that truth in several particulars:
- 1) First of all, he'd foregone his right to "*eat and drink*" (9:4). There are two likely meanings here: The first is that Paul was speaking of the right he and his apostolic associates had to have their sustenance provided to them without paying or working for it. This view is supported by what follows in verses 6-14. The other option is that Paul was referring to the right to eat and drink whatever they chose. This interpretation is supported by the larger contextual issue of eating food that had been sacrificed to idols. Whichever Paul intended, the general thrust is the same: Paul and his associates had a bona fide right that they refused to exercise.
 - 2) The second right Paul had foregone was the right to *include a believing wife* in his labors in the gospel (9:5). The fact that Paul associated this right with the matter of being supported in his ministry rather than having to work (9:6) suggests two possible meanings. The first is that he was referring to the right to have a wife with him to care for his daily physical needs. In that way he'd be freed from concerns for his own provision and able to concentrate on the ministry of the gospel. The other possibility is that Paul was referring to the right of Christ's ministers to have their spouses accompany them and also receive support from the churches.

Many read this passage and find themselves sidetracked by such concerns as Paul's marital history, the reason for his mention of Cephas (Peter) and the Lord's brothers, and how it was that Barnabas was connected with the church at Corinth. These questions have merit, but can't be answered with certainty. What is concrete and clear is Paul's point: For all the hardship that comes from leaving one's wife behind, Paul and Barnabas (at least) set aside their right to have their wives with them in order to not impose a burden on Christ's saints – including the Corinthians themselves.

- 3) The third “right” builds upon the previous one: Like all those who devote themselves to the ministry of Christ’s gospel, Paul was entitled to the church’s *financial support* in his labors. If he and his associates had the right to have a wife accompany them and care for their daily needs – and they *did*, they equally had the right to the support of the body of Christ. Jesus had called them to give themselves entirely to the ministry of the gospel, and the Church’s obligation in that calling was to free them up from having to work in a different vocation (9:6). Having asserted that right, Paul proceeded to substantiate it from several vantage points (9:7ff):

First, Paul drew upon the examples of a *soldier* and *farmer*, which he considered apt metaphors for Christian service (9:7; cf. 2 Timothy 2:3-7). With respect to the former, because soldiers serve on behalf of another and not themselves, everyone recognizes that they aren’t expected to pay their own expenses. Rather, the lord or nation they fight for supplies their provision. In the case of a soldier, the one who is served provides for the one who serves; in the case of a farmer, his provision is drawn from the crops and animals he tends. He may not himself own the fields, flocks and herds, but he is entitled to a portion of their yield. As it is with farmers, so it is with Christ’s ministers who are laborers in His field and shepherds of His flock (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 with Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

These considerations and practices are affirmed by all men, but also by God Himself: In His prescription to Israel the Lord insisted that they not “*muzzle the ox while he is threshing*” (9:8-9; ref. Deuteronomy 25:4). The direct purpose for this law was to insure that the sons of Israel would not abuse their oxen by keeping them from feeding on the grain they were threshing. By muzzling his oxen, a farmer would obtain more grain from the threshing process, but he would be requiring his “laborers” to work for free. The law pertained directly to threshing animals, but the principle was universal: Israel needed to recognize and comply with the ethic that every creature is entitled to receive compensation for its labors. If this applies to animals, how much more to human workers (cf. James 5:1-4)?

The Mosaic Code specified that laborers draw a wage from their labors, but the Law served a larger, ultimate purpose. Like every feature of the salvation history, the Law prophesied of the Messiah and His kingdom (cf. Matthew 11:13 with Luke 24:27, 44-48 and John 5:39). Thus when Paul observed that God isn’t concerned with oxen (9:9b), he wasn’t pointing to a concern for human laborers as such, but for those who labor in God’s field in the kingdom of Christ. Paul recognized that this law, as the entire Mosaic Code, has been “christified” – fulfilled and transformed in Christ – and has now attained its intended meaning and relevance in relation to the “Israel of God” in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ. This dynamic is precisely the reason for Paul’s insistence that God was thereby “*speaking altogether for our sake*” (9:10).

“Paul claims that the text addresses the church of his own time directly, in an oracular fashion, metaphorically instructing them to provide financial support for Paul and other apostles. This is for Paul not a derived sense of the text, but its fundamental meaning, now eschatologically disclosed.” (Richard Hays, emphasis added)

The above metaphors together highlight the *principle of reciprocity*: Those who serve the benefit of another are entitled to receive benefit for their labors. But in this particular instance, Paul heightens this principle by arguing from the greater to the lesser, and that in two ways: First, he and his associates had labored to impart *spiritual* benefit to the Lord’s people; were they not, then, entitled to receive back from the saints the lesser benefit of *material* support (9:11; cf. Galatians 6:6)? Secondly, the Corinthians had provided support to others who labored among them as spiritual leaders. If those men were worthy of material support, how much more was Paul who was their father in the faith (9:12a)?

Lastly, Paul cited two pinnacle proofs in his contention of his right to be supported in his labors. These proofs provide a suitable capstone in that they emphasize the *divine nature and orientation* of the apostolic work. Paul and his associates weren’t serving themselves or their own agenda. Neither were they servants of a religious cause or program. *They labored as God’s ministers in His sanctuary on behalf of the cornerstone Himself.*

- God required that His sanctuary (through its sacrificial ministrations) provide sustenance to the priestly ministers who served it; how much more is that the case in regard to His fulfilled, living sanctuary which is the Church (9:13; cf. 3:16, 6:19)?
- Yahweh had commanded the Mosaic covenant community to provide this support; now Yahweh incarnate and glorified in Jesus Christ commanded His Church of the new covenant to provide it to their ministering servants (9:14).

For all of these reasons Paul and his fellow laborers in the gospel could claim full rights in the sight of God to the Corinthians’ financial support, and yet he’d refused to require what was rightfully his. Paul (and Barnabas at least) willingly endured the hardship of providing for his own support in order to “*cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ*” (9:12).

Not only had Paul set aside his right to financial and physical support, he provided for his own needs by working as a common laborer. Paul, the prestigious scholar, rabbi and divinely-chosen apostle, was willing to earn a minimal wage in the menial task of making tents (Acts 18:1-3). Ironically, this very act of love and service to the Corinthians became an occasion for their doubt and reproach against him: No man who was a true apostle would degrade himself in that way.