

Compelled to Preach the Gospel

I Corinthians 9:1-18

¹ 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.

³ 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? ⁷ 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?

⁸ Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? ⁹ 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. ¹¹ 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?

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. ¹³ 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.

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁸ 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.

- I Corinthians 9:1-18, ESV

The Power of Rhetorical Questions

Questions are powerful stimulants for real learning. The most famous questioner of all time was probably Socrates, as the method of teaching by asking questions in a logically progressive manner is still called the Socratic method, but Jesus used questions powerfully when He was challenged during His earthly ministry.

When the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus asked him what the Law required. When the Pharisees and the Herodians conspired together to try to trap Jesus by asking Him whether they should pay taxes to Caesar or not, Jesus asked them to bring Him a denarius and then asked them whose likeness and inscription was on the coin. Only then, after asking them, did He tell them to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.

When Jesus wanted to see how much the disciples understood of who He was, He asked them first who the people said He was and then asked them, “Who do you say I am?”

Questions confront our assumptions and expose our lack of knowledge, as well as helping us connect the dots of what we already know to reach a sound conclusion. As we return to I Corinthians today, we see the Apostle Paul engaging the Corinthians with a series of rhetorical questions. In a letter, you can't ask questions that really require a response, like you can in a conversation. Instead, you need to ask rhetorical questions – questions you already know the answer to and which you know your audience already knows the answer to, too. Through the use of skillful rhetorical questions, Paul leads the Corinthians down the path to many important truths, not by lecturing them, but by helping them see the truth for themselves.

Paul begins asking questions early and often in I Corinthians. We saw when we began I Corinthians that Paul confronted the issue of divisions in the church first and said – “each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” – I Cor. 1:12-13, ESV

When confronting the Corinthians' addiction to worldly Greek wisdom and the sophisticated speakers of their culture, Paul asked, “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach^[2] to save those who believe.” – I Cor. 1:20-21, ESV

In fact, in the 16 chapters of I Corinthians, Paul asks over 100 questions, almost all of them rhetorical questions. This is important, in part, because of Paul's reputation in Corinth and the worldliness the Corinthians struggled with. The Corinthians valued wisdom, which, in a Greek culture where the philosophical tradition started with Socrates over 400 years before Paul, highly valued rhetorical questions and skillful questioning. Paul was regarded as unsophisticated and somewhat foolish, because while he was in Corinth for over a year and a half, he did not use any of the Greek rhetorical tricks of the trade but was determined to preach Christ and Him crucified, foolishness to Greeks and a stumbling block to Jews. Throughout I Corinthians, Paul is deliberately demonstrating his rhetorical skill – Paul was a highly educated man, schooled in both Greek and Jewish learning – while keeping the focus squarely on Christ and the Gospel. It's almost as if he's saying, “Look, if you're so impressed with rhetoric, I'll show you that I can play that game well, too, but that's not what impresses me, and it's not what should impress you either. Jesus is what really matters, all that really matters.”

I. Paul's Apostleship, vv. 1-3

As we transition from chapter 8 to chapter 9, we find Paul defending the legitimacy of His apostleship:

¹ 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.

³ *This is my defense to those who would examine me. – vv. 1-3*

Paul's status as an Apostle is being questioned in Corinth, and while it seems like Paul is vigorously defending himself in this section, the heart of the matter for Paul is not himself personally but the Gospel he preached among the Corinthians. After Paul had left Corinth, legitimate teachers like Apollos had come and helped the church grow, but other men, so-called "super Apostles" had also come, and they were peddlers of the Word of God, commanding huge sums of money for their skillful and engaging rhetoric. But the Gospel they were preaching was not the sound Gospel of Christ crucified and resurrected, which Paul had preached. For Paul to defend the Gospel, he was compelled to defend his position as an Apostle.

An Apostle was someone personally commissioned and sent out by the Lord Jesus Himself to proclaim the Gospel and establish churches. Wherever Paul went, almost without exception, he preached Christ and he established churches. He did so with the authority of someone who had had a face-to-face encounter with the risen Lord Jesus who had personally saved him and commissioned him as an Apostle. It was on the Road to Damascus, as recorded in Acts 9, that Jesus confronted Saul of Tarsus, who was on a rampage of persecution against the church, and after striking him blind and humbling him, Jesus send Ananias to restore Paul's sight and confirm his commission as an Apostle.

In addition to his calling as an Apostle by Jesus Himself, Paul also appeals to the seal of his Apostleship, which is the Corinthians themselves. The fact that he had been used by God to bring the light of the Gospel to Corinth and establish a church there, the very fact of the salvation and gathering together of the Corinthians themselves, was the seal to authenticate the reality of Paul's status as an Apostle.

Even though verse 3 begins the second paragraph of this chapter in the ESV, I believe it should be best understood as the conclusion of the opening. "*This is my defense to those who would examine me.*" Paul is here using courtroom language, and the courts were one of the most popular places to display rhetoric in Corinth. He says that his calling and the seal of his ministry are his defense to those who would cross-examine him.

II. Paul's Rights, vv. 4-14

Having defended the fact of his Apostleship by his calling and the seal of his ministry, Paul then goes on to remind the Corinthians of the rights he has as an Apostle. Again, he does so through the use of skillful rhetorical questioning –

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?* ⁷ *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?*

⁸ *Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same?* ⁹ *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.* ¹¹ *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?

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. ¹³ 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. – vv. 4-14

Paul's opening defense in verse 1 creates serious problems for those who today would call themselves Apostles as a title with a capital A. Only those who saw the resurrected Jesus personally and who were commissioned by Him directly have the rights of Apostles. Well, verse 5 then created serious problems for the Roman Catholic church, which teaches that those in ministry are forbidden to marry and also teaches that Jesus was an only child because Mary remained a Virgin forever. Well, here Paul makes reference to the brothers of the Lord, which includes the men who wrote the books of James and Jude, and says that they and Peter were all married men, whose wives accompanied them in their ministries.

When Paul references "taking along a believing wife," he means more than just being married to a fellow Christian; he is talking about being supported in ministry along with your wife, who is your helper in all things. Alistair Begg makes an important point in his sermon on this passage, one which we should keep in mind as a church: When churches invite pastors to come and speak for them, they should cover travel expenses for the wives of the ministers, too. Too many pastors and evangelists fall into temptations because they travel alone, often because churches don't want to deal with the extra expenses of paying for the wives to travel with their husbands.

The focus of these verses is not on marriage but on the right of those called by God to the Gospel ministry to be supported by the church in their calling. This is part of the reason for the Presbyterian tradition of always ordaining men to a calling. The final step in being prepared for ordination in the PCA is that you need to be called by a church or ministry willing to support you. It's the external confirmation of the internal call to the ministry.

Paul uses five distinct arguments to support the idea that men called to the Gospel ministry should be fully supported in the ministry – and really, in such a way that their wives don't have to seek work to support the family either (Not that they can't work outside the home, but they shouldn't feel the compulsion or necessity to do so):

1. The argument from natural analogy: *"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?" – v. 7*
2. The argument from the Law of Moses: *"Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? ⁹ 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." – v. 8.* Paul is saying God isn't only concerned for oxen, but He is also even more concerned for His laborers in His harvest field.

3. The logical argument from the greater to the lesser: *“If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?” – v. 11.* If we have given you a greater blessing, even eternal life, how much more should we receive lesser, material blessings from you?
4. The logical argument from the lesser to the greater: *“If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?” – v. 12.* If lesser teachers have this right, how much more do we?
5. An example of argument from the pagan temples in Corinth: *“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?” – v. 13* (This could be a reference to the Temple in Jerusalem, but it seems more natural to the largely pagan-background Gentile Corinthians to make the connection to the dozens of Temples in Corinth.)

III. Paul’s Necessity, vv. 15-16

Paul goes to great lengths in these five arguments to lay out his rights, only to immediately explain why he and Barnabas did not exercise these rights when they were in Corinth. Paul knew he was stuck between two camps of potential critics. Some would criticize him if he was not well supported by the Corinthians in Corinth. After all, what kind of traveling religious teacher isn’t even good enough to be supported by the people he’s teaching? On the other hand, some would criticize him if he did take support from the Corinthians, as they would accuse him of only being in it for the money. One would be an attack on his skill as a rhetorician, while the other would be an attack on his motives as a minister of the Gospel. Given that dilemma, the choice was easy for Paul:

He says first in 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.”*

And then he further clarifies in verses 15-16: *“¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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!”*

Verse 12 seems pretty straightforward. He didn’t want to create obstacles to Gospel belief (“This guy’s only in it for the money.”), so he was willing to work hard as a tentmaker/leatherworker, cutting back on the time and energy he would have available for ministry, and then later to accept support from the Philippian church, all to avoid causing anyone to stumble unnecessarily at his Gospel ministry. [Incidentally, this is why missionaries today are supported by home churches and don’t put the burden on the people they’re sent to preach.]

But verses 15-16 are much trickier. What is Paul talking about when he refers to his “ground for boasting”? Is Paul saying, basically, “Well, I didn’t really have any choice as to whether or not I was going to preach the Gospel. I was and am compelled to do so. But if I preach the Gospel for free, without changing any money, then I can boast of what a selfless and generous guy I am.”? That is one possible way to read the text, and some Bible scholars do read it that way. But that it not in keeping with what Paul says elsewhere about his ground for boasting nor with what he says earlier in I

Corinthians about why he preached the way he did.

In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul said: “*And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*”

And in Galatians 6:14, Paul wrote: “*But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*”

And then, later, in 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul writes, “*Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*”

So, put these pieces together: The only things Paul will boast in are in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ and in his own weaknesses. And, he decided to know nothing among the Corinthians but Christ and Him crucified so that their “*faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*”

The ground of Paul’s boasting is the cross, which is the wisdom of God and the power of God for salvation. If he had preached with great rhetorical skill and taken support from the Corinthians, he would have been regarded as just another religious professional, and the church would have been seen as Paul’s work, skillfully crafted by his great speaking. He adamantly refused such an idea!

Paul says he would rather die than plant a church that way, where the focus was on his skill as a speaker and not on the cross, on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul says, “*I preach a Gospel that gives me no ground for boasting in myself.*” This is why John Piper’s book for his fellow pastors and teachers of God’s word is called, *Brothers, We are not Professionals!* We MUST preach Christ. We MUST preach the Gospel. We must not be slick and polished and “professional.” Richard Baxter, one of the best preachers of the great Puritan era, said, “I preach as a dying man to dying men.” Charles Spurgeon, the great London preacher of the 1800’s, said, “I am determined, as far as ever I can, to preach the gospel plainly and simply, so that everybody may understand it.” And he advised his Pastor’s College students, “Preach you Christ, and Christ, and Christ, and Christ, and nothing else but Christ.”

IV. Paul’s Reward, vv. 17-18

And what was the reward Paul was seeking, if not the praise of men or worldly gain and comforts?

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. ¹⁸ 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. – vv. 17-18

Paul saw himself as a steward, one entrusted with a stewardship, the stewardship of the Gospel, and not as a hireling. A church may call a man to be her pastor, but it is only after the Lord Jesus has called him

to be a steward of the Gospel, and the church's call is but external confirmation of the Lord's call. A church cannot ever hire a preacher. A preacher is not for hire. He serves a higher Master.

So, as a steward, Paul sought a steward's reward: to please the Master. By preaching the Gospel free of charge, he was free to keep his eyes locked on his Master and not worry about anyone else. He could love his flock, as a good and faithful under-shepherd, and it's clear that Paul loved the Corinthians dearly, but he could not ultimately be worried about their expectations and their desires. He **MUST** preach Christ!

This is obviously an awkward text for me to preach as your pastor. If I emphasize the Apostle Paul's five-part argument in favor of fully supporting men in Gospel ministry, you might think I'm asking for a raise or trying to justify my salary. I'm not doing that. If I emphasize how the Apostle Paul set aside his rights for the sake of the Gospel, to magnify the cross of Christ, and to remove any stumbling blocks, you might think I should do the same and go get a "real job," to free up the church from having to support me. I hope you don't think that.

I am blessed and thankful to be your pastor, and I love being called to preach Christ to you. You don't pay me to preach Christ. I would gladly do so for free, because I absolutely must do so and love doing do. I cannot do otherwise. Your support allows me to be free from worldly concerns so I can focus on kingdom ministry, as a student of the Word and a shepherd of the flock. I hope to grow as a faithful under-shepherd of the Lord Jesus, the Great Shepherd. I am well supplied, and I am content and thankful.

What Drives Your Life?

The other danger of preaching text like this is that it feels like message from a preacher about preachers and maybe even primarily for preachers. And that's not true either. The passionate heartbeat of the Apostle Paul here, as a man entrusted with the stewardship of the Gospel, should challenge us and shape us. We can see clearly what drove the Apostle Paul. What drives your life?

What is your passion? Do you realize that you, too, have been entrusted with a stewardship of the Gospel? All Christians are Gospel stewards, called and commissioned to keep the trust of the Gospel and share it with those in our lives. Most unbelievers aren't going to come here to worship to hear the Gospel; you'll hear it from me and then they'll hear it from you.

Are you living in such a way as to remove obstacles and stumbling blocks that keep people from the Gospel, and are you laboring as a steward to share the Gospel with those in your life? Is Christ and His Gospel the driving heartbeat of your life? We dare not live for anything less!