

High Peaks Bible Fellowship

Mastering Christian Liberty 1 Corinthians 9:1-27

Introduction

- First Corinthians chapter nine is really a continuation of Paul's discussion of Christian Liberty from chapter eight. In the last verse of chapter eight, Paul held up his own example as a model for the Corinthians to imitate regarding giving up one's Christian liberty for the benefit of less mature Christians.
- Here in chapter nine Paul will illustrate this principle by discussing another important issue: the support of Christian workers by the churches.

Paul establishes his apostolic rights (1 Cor 9:1-6)

- Paul uses a series of rhetorical questions to establish that he had the freedom of a true apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. Just because Paul chose not to exercise his Christian liberty did not mean that he was not free to use his rights.
- "Am I not an apostle?" = Paul now begins to prove that he is indeed an appointed apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- "Have I not seen Jesus?" = Paul gives the basis for his apostolic office. An apostle was required to have seen the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:21-22). It is the appearance of the resurrected Lord, and Christ's official appointment of Paul to apostleship that is the basis for his apostolic office.
- "Are you not my work?" = Apart from the claim to have seen the risen Christ, how could a true apostle be identified? By his work -- the very existence of the church in Corinth authenticated Paul's apostolic ministry.
- "You are the seal of my apostleship" = the word seal (*sphragis*) means a visible proof, confirmation, or authentication of something that already exists. The founding of the church in Corinth was evidence of Paul's genuine apostolic activity.
- "My defense" (*apologia*) = this word was used of the defense in a court of law. "To those who examine me" (*anakrino*) = used of cross-examining someone during a court proceeding. Some members of the church in Corinth were questioning Paul's apostolic authority.
- "A right to eat and drink" = this refers to the legitimate right of an apostle to "eat and drink" at the expense of the church -- the right to receive support from the church he founded.
- "A right to take along a believing wife" = This shows that as apostles labor among the churches, they have the right to the support of the church for their entire family (including their wife and children). Paul then cited several examples of this practice among the apostolic community: "As the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas" = this implies that the majority of the other apostles were married and took their wives with them as they ministered among the churches.
- "Do only Barnabas and I not have this right" = the fact that Paul and Barnabas did not take advantage of their right to the support of the churches could be taken to mean that they were not really apostles. So, next Paul defends the legitimate right of Christian workers to receive support from those to whom they minister.

Paul Argues for the Right of Ministers to the Support of the Churches

Argument #1: The analogy from everyday occupations (1 Cor 9:7)

- The soldier, the farmer, and the shepherd all partake of the rewards of their labors. This shows that it was the customary practice to pay workers who diligently labor in their calling.
- Payment for one's labor has always been the expected and customary practice in every society. Therefore, Christian workers should expect nothing less.

Argument #2: Scriptural testimony for supporting ministers (1 Cor 9:8-11)

- Even God's Law addressed this and can be applied to the issue of supporting Christian ministers.
- Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING." This shows not so much God's concern for the well-being of the oxen, but His concern that a person who serves the Lord in the harvest field should do so with the hope of sharing in the results of the harvest -- even in some physical way that is analogous to the work of an ox who is allowed to eat some of the physical grain.
- "God is not concerned about oxen, is He?" = this did not mean that God does not care about animals. He is concerned over a sparrow that falls to the ground (Matt 10:29). But if God cares this much for the animals, how much more does He care about the support and livelihood of human beings? What is true for animals in this analogy is true in much greater measure for human beings.
- "For our sake it was written" = the common practice of not muzzling an ox was used to teach the principle that human workers should reap some reward for their labor.
- "If we sowed spiritual things" (first class conditional clause) = a condition assumed to be true. A genuine spiritual ministry actually did take place, and it is not too much to ask for the support of genuine godly ministers who foster your spiritual growth. This verse implies that there is a condition which must be met before you support Christian workers. They must sow spiritual things and actually produce a valuable result among God's people.

Argument #3: They were giving support to other ministers (1 Cor 9:12)

- "If others share the right over you" = the Corinthians were giving support to some of their other ministers, and this proved they understood this principle. As an apostle and as the founding pastor of the church in Corinth, Paul had even more of a claim on their support than others did.
- "Nevertheless, we did not use this right" = here Paul strongly restates his own example of denying the right of support. "We endure all things" (*stego*) = to bear; to cover over with silence; to silently forbear. "So that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel" = this is why Paul gave up his right to support.
- How could receiving support for his ministry hinder the gospel? It is possible that potential converts might hesitate to accept the gospel if they thought they would be required to contribute financially to support the leaders. Paul's practice was to support himself in order to avoid this potential hindrance to the gospel (see also Acts 20:33 and 2 Thess 3:8).

Argument #4: This was the common practice in pagan and Jewish temple ministries (1 Cor 9:13)

- It was common knowledge that those who ministered in the temples received their support from the proceeds of the temple. This was true in the Jewish temple, as well as in the pagan temples in the city of Corinth.

Argument #5: Jesus Himself supported the practice (1 Cor 9:14)

- This is probably a reference to the words of the Lord Jesus: "The laborer is worthy of his hire" (Matt 10:10; Luke 10:7). Christ declared that this arrangement was the proper method of support for the workers He sent out to minister (see also Galatians 6:6).
- "Get their living" -- this does not mean that ministers should get *rich* from Christian service. They should be able to live a lifestyle similar to that of those to whom they minister.

Why Paul Practiced the Principle of Self-denial

Reason #1: Because of his call to preach the gospel without charge (1 Cor 9:15-18)

- "I have used none of these" = Paul had the gift of singleness (1 Cor 7:7), so he was better able meet his own needs without detracting from his ministry activities. Even though this added to his burden, he was able to go without the support of the churches. Paul was not writing so that they *would* begin supporting him.
- "Better for me to die" = Paul would rather die from lack of support than to be deprived of the privilege of preaching the Gospel without charge and therefore without hindrance.
- "My boast" (*kauchema*) = to glory or rejoice in something. This was not some kind of proud boasting, but

- legitimate rejoicing or glorying in what God had called him to do (see also Gal 6:4).
- Paul is saying that simply preaching the gospel brings him no extra credit, because he has no choice in the matter. He cannot do anything else BUT preach the gospel! He can claim no special reward for doing what he was commissioned to do. It would be disobedient for Paul to anything other than preach the gospel -- and this explains why Paul would say, "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel."
 - "If I do this voluntarily" (third class conditional clause) = a supposition for the sake of argument. It is as if Paul is giving two unique "cases" for the sake of argument:
 1. "Let's *suppose* that I am simply exercising my own human choice in deciding to preach the gospel, then I might expect a special reward of some kind."
 2. "But *suppose* I am under compulsion to preach the gospel -- despite my own choice or desire. In this second case, then, I am merely functioning as a steward who has been entrusted with a task, and there is no special reward. I would simply be doing my duty."
 - Paul fits the second case in his argument -- he is a commissioned apostle with a stewardship entrusted to him by God Himself. Paul cannot help but carry out this task (see 1 Cor 4:1-2). This means that Paul is in no position to claim a reward, and the question naturally follows: "What then is my reward?"
 - "Reward" (*misthos*) = Here we can see a connection to Paul's previous discussion of the work of Christian ministers (see 1 Cor 3:8, 14), and specifically to the Paul's own example or practice in his ministry work.
 - "I may offer the gospel without charge" = preaching without charge is the reward, because it means that he is putting no stumbling block in the way of the gospel. It was with great satisfaction that Paul refused to take advantage of his legitimate right to support, and he did this in order to make a contribution of his very own to making the gospel flourish more than was otherwise possible.
 - "Make full use of my right" (*katachraomai*) = to use excessively or consume by use. Paul did not want to allow for even the *possibility* of over-using or abusing his right to support in his ministry, even though he did have every right to the support of the Church.

Reason #2: For the sake of winning souls (1 Cor 9:19-23)

- "Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all" = Paul was a free man and a Roman citizen, which was a rare status in the society of his day. But because of his love for God and his commission to share the gospel with all men, he figuratively became a slave to all men -- he limited his freedom for their sake.
- "So that I may win more" = Why did Paul do this? To win more people to Christ. What Paul did by limiting his freedom was not part of the gospel message, but it helped many people to listen to the gospel and be more open to receive it.
- "To the Jews I became as a Jew" = When Paul ministered among unbelieving Jews, he "became as a Jew." Paul *was* a Jew, so how could he *become* as a Jew? The Jew believed he was under the Law and related to God in legal terms. But Paul was not related to God in this way -- he was no longer under the Law, but he could behave *as if* he were under the law. He could be as Jewish as necessary in order to win those who were under the Law.
- However, Paul never taught that following the Mosaic Law would provide any spiritual benefit whatsoever. He would behave as a Jew only in order to open the door of ministry among the unbelieving Jews of his day.
- "To those who are without law, as without law" = Paul was willing to live like a Gentile when he was working among Gentiles. Paul identified as closely as possible with Gentile customs, with the goal of winning the Gentiles to Christ. The Gentiles believed they were outside of God's jurisdiction -- they did not acknowledge His law in any way.
- "Though not being without the law but under the law of Christ" = Paul clarifies that, even though he is able to live like the Gentiles in order to win some of them, he fully understands that he is *not* like they are in this regard (being "without law" and refusing to acknowledge God's jurisdiction). In the previous verse Paul said that he is not under the Mosaic Law, so here he explains that this does not mean he has no moral obligation whatsoever. As a Christian, Paul is now related to God by grace through faith and he is obligated to follow the example and commandments of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- "To the weak I became weak" = The term weak connects with what Paul had previously said regarding Christians who were weak in conscience (1 Cor 8:7). Paul put himself in the place of those who did not have the maturity of understanding to grasp the implications of the gospel. He applied the general principle of yielding his Christian liberty in order to provide a basis for a "winning" relationship with unbelievers as well as with weak believers.
- "I have become all things to all men" = this states the general principle Paul applied: He would identify as closely as possible with all people in order to direct them to the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice that Paul himself would adapt to the circumstances, but he would not adapt the truths of the gospel to the

circumstances. He would not offend others by his own actions, but he would not hide the "offense of the gospel" itself.

- "I do all things for the sake of the gospel" = Here we catch a glimpse of the passion of Paul's life for the work that God had commissioned him to do. He would yield his own rights and give up his Christian liberties in any way that would further God's work.

Reason #3: For the sake of a minister's reward (1 Cor 9:24-27)

- "Those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize" = here Paul uses the illustration of the Isthmian Games, which were held in Corinth. The athletes were required to prove they had rigorously trained in order to compete in sporting events with the potential for being acknowledged as winners.
- "Run in such a way that you may win" = this is a command (imperative), and it implies that you will not win if you do not carefully train and adapt yourself to the conditions of the track. The terms prize and win are connected to the idea of reward for the Christian worker (1 Cor 3:8, 14; 9:17-18).
- "Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things" = all of the athletes in the games would train themselves by exercising self-control in every area of their lives. By way of analogy, here Paul is saying that Christian liberty cannot be yielded or limited without exercising that same kind of self-control.
- In Paul's analogy, the worldly athlete is motivated by a perishable earthly prize -- but the Christian should be motivated by a prize that will last through eternity. The imperishable wreath is analogous to the reward for a Christian worker which is given at the Judgment Seat of Christ (see 1 Cor 3:14; 2 Cor 5:10). Paul suggests a matter of degree: if an *earthly athlete* limits his liberty like this, how much more should a *Christian* exercise self-control in doing the same thing?
- "I run in such a way, as not without aim" = Paul had a definite purpose or aim in running his race as a Christian. His goal was to win as many as he possibly could to faith and maturity in the Lord Jesus Christ.
- "I box in such a way, as not beating the air" = Paul switches his illustration to another of the sports in the athletic games. He says he does not box as if he is only "beating the air" -- he is not training himself to "shadow box" or merely pretend to fight. He trains himself for real spiritual battle.
- "I discipline my body" (*hupopiazō*) = to hit under the eye. Paul would figuratively give his body a black eye, or knock it out if necessary, in order to put it into subjection to God's purposes. A large part of our struggle is against our own flesh, and our training should involve disciplining the body as a whole (physically, mentally, emotionally, and volitionally) in order to prepare for ministry. This is the kind of discipline that is required by Christians in order to yield our Christian liberty so we do not cause people to reject the gospel or to destroy the faith of less mature believers.
- "So that I myself will not be disqualified" = The term *disqualified* relates to the potential reward for service in ministry. It is possible for a minister to lose out on the reward that he could have received in his service to the Lord (see 1 Cor 3:15).
- As Paul ends this chapter with the description of his life of self-discipline, we can see the truth that a God-honoring life involves the *limitation* of our Christian liberty as often as it involves the *enjoyment* of our freedom in Christ.

Copyright © 2005 by [Steve Lewis](#)

Unmodified copies of this material may be reproduced for non-commercial use.

[High Peaks Bible Fellowship](#)

Our primary purpose is to uphold the truths of the Word of God (1 Timothy 3:15).

Our primary responsibility is to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12).