

| 1 Corinthians |

Week 14 Scripture Guide | 1 Corinthians 9:1-27

Biblical Context

Paul has been writing about Christians not allowing their “right” (ἐξουσία, *exousia*, “authority”) to become a stumbling block to someone else (1 Cor 8:9). He ended chapter 8 with his assertion, “Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble” (8:13).¹ Paul now further shares how he surrenders his “rights” for the sake of the gospel.² He opens by asking a series of rhetorical questions using his apostleship as the basis for what follows.³ Some in Corinth doubt his apostleship (9:2a) while Paul shows how the existence of the church in Corinth is evidence of his “apostleship in the Lord” (9:1-2; 2 Cor 3:1-3; Acts 18). If anyone has “rights” or spiritual authority in Corinth, it is Paul and other apostles. While he has asked Christians in Corinth to give up their rights for the sake of the gospel, he shows how he has done the same. In chapter 1, Paul addressed divisions in the church which had their root in the Corinthians viewing the teachers in terms of popular contemporary philosophy—involving the form and content of teaching (cf. 1:17; 2:1-5), but also their teachers’ means of support.⁴ “Philosophers and wandering missionaries in the Greco-Roman world made their living in one of four ways: fees, patronage, begging, and working. Each of these had both proponents and detractors, who viewed rival forms as not worthy of philosophy.”⁵ In 9:4-14, Paul explains that he is fully aware of his rights as a teacher and an apostle, which include the meeting of basic sustenance (9:4), taking a believing wife (9:5),⁶ and refraining from having to work for his own support (9:6). With three more rhetorical questions, he uses the example of a soldier, farmer and shepherd to show that a worker has a right to glean from their labors (9:7).⁷ This concept is not merely embedded in secular examples but is even found in the Law of Moses,⁸ “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain” (9:9; Deut 25:4). He explains how this passage is applied, not just to an ox, but to people—laborers who labor with expectation of benefits from the harvest. While Corinth was frequented by itinerant teachers, orators, and philosophers who received pay for their eloquent speeches (9:12a), Paul did not make use of this “right.” He did not want it to become an obstacle for the gospel, though even Jesus said that the apostles, as preachers of the gospel, had the right to have their basic needs met (9:12b-14; Matt 10:10).⁹

Again, Paul asserts that he has not made use of any of these rights (1 Cor 9:15a). Not only that, but he says, “nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision” (9:15b), as they have provided for others (cf. 9:12a). The issue was not that the Corinthian church was withholding this right from Paul but that Paul did not make use of his right, and he was not starting now.¹⁰ In light of the cultural backdrop, Paul did not want his support to detract from the message of the gospel. He says, “I would rather die than anyone render my boasting void!” (9:15c).¹¹ Paul would rather die than give up preaching the gospel freely (cf. Matt 10:8b) which, for him, is a privilege. For Paul to preach the gospel is itself not grounds for boasting (9:16). It is not merely something Paul has chosen to do, but is something that Paul *must* do. He is under no internal, personal compulsion to preach, nor

¹ The precipitating issue was eating “food sacrificed to idols.” Some Christians, knowing that idols weren’t real, had no issue eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol. This was offensive to weaker Christians (potentially with a pagan, idol-worshipping past) who viewed them as actually partaking in idol worship. Paul asks those with this “right” to give up their rights for the sake of the gospel, rather than defile the conscience of one for whom Christ died.

² The word ἐξουσία (*exousia*, “right,” “authority”) is used six times in chapter 9.

³ He begins each question with the negative particle, οὐκ, which elicits affirmative answers (e.g. “Am I not free?” = “Of course I am free!” etc.).

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 441.

⁵ Fee, 441. “The evidence suggests that by the time of his ministry in Thessalonica Paul had generally abandoned patronage (Acts 16:15) for working (in his case in the trade of tentmaking) as his basic means of support (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:7-9; 1 Cor. 4:12; cf. Acts 18:3).”

⁶ The right to marriage was perhaps something Paul also sacrificed for the sake of the gospel (cf. 1 Cor 7:7-8, 32, 38b).

⁷ These rhetorical questions all begin with τίς (*tis*, “who?”) and expects the answer, “no one.”

⁸ “The Law of Moses” refers generally to the first five books of the Old Testament, also called the Torah (Heb. “law”) and Pentateuch (Gr. “five books”), and is used more specifically to the laws that God gave Moses to instruct the Israelites.

⁹ While Jesus told his disciples, “the laborer deserves his food” (Matt 10:10), he also said “You received without paying; give without pay” (10:8b).

While Paul did not make full use of his right in the Corinthian church, there is evidence that he was supported by other churches (cf. 2 Cor 11:7-9; Phil 4:15).

¹⁰ If it were an issue of the church withholding financial support for Paul, then he would not be sacrificing anything, but merely be a defrauded victim. While other teachers were receiving support for eloquent speeches, Paul appears to refuse, “rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel” (9:12b).

¹¹ In the Greek text, grammatically, this reads as an anacoluthon (grammatical break) or an aposiopesis (“a sudden breaking off of a thought in the middle of a sentence, as though the speaker were unwilling or unable to continue.”) Lit. “I would rather die than... no one will make my boasting empty!”

is he under any carnal external compulsion to preach (e.g. being paid to do so). He was compelled to preach Christ because of what God had done in his life (Gal 1:15-16; Phil 3:12). “Paul is reflecting once more on his ‘servanthood,’ which for him meant ‘calling’ and ‘joy,’ not drudgery and head-hanging obedience. He cannot boast in the task of proclaiming the good news of Christ to the Gentiles because that is what he must do by divine design, an ‘obligation’ he has gladly taken on as divine calling.”¹² Paul builds on the tension of being both a freeman (“For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward...”), and a servant, (“...but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship” (1 Cor 9:17). If one is free and does so voluntarily, they are entitled to wages (μισθός, *misthos*; cf. 3:8, 14). However, because Paul is preaching out of divine (not personal) compulsion, he does not make use of his right to receive pay, but rather views himself as a faithful steward (cf. 4:1-2), discharging the duty entrusted to him by Jesus, himself (Acts 9). As an entrusted steward, Paul is neither entitled to boast nor expectant of compensation. Thus, his reward is not pay, but the joy of preaching the gospel free of charge, making sure not to misuse his right (1 Cor 9:18). Herein is a Pauline paradox, “my reward is to receive no reward.”¹³ His reward (eschatologically speaking, cf. 3:14) is to receive no earthly wage for preaching the gospel, removing any obstacle to the gospel. This provides him the freedom *from* all people, so that he may become a servant (δουλόω, *doulōō*) to all people (9:19).¹⁴ Because of this, Paul is able to become “all things to all people” (9:22b) for the sake of the gospel. When among Jews (those “under the law”), he behaved in a way that was “kosher” to Jews, though not falling from the grace he had in Jesus, in order to win them (9:20; e.g. Acts 16:3; 18:18; 21:23; cf. Gal 2:3, 11). To the gentiles not having the law (ἄνομος, *anomos*, “lawless”), he behaved as one not under the Jewish law, but still obeying the ethical imperatives of the Christian faith (1 Cor 9:21; e.g. Acts 15:10; 28; Rom 7:6; Gal 3:2; 5:18), in order to win those outside the law. To the “weak” (ἀσθενής, *asthenes*, 1 Cor 8:7; cf. 1:26), he became as weak (8:13; Rom 14) in order to win the weak. Paul’s goal was the uninhibited sacrificial presentation of the gospel for the express purpose of the salvation of others (1 Cor 9:23).

Paul uses the athletic metaphors of running and boxing to articulate his point (1 Cor 9:24-27). It was common for philosophers to use athletic illustrations to describe their striving for truth and wise living; Paul adopts this for his audience.¹⁵ Corinth was on the “isthmus” (land bridge) of Greece and hosted the biennial Isthmian Games, sure to be fresh in the minds of the readers. Athletes (ἀγωνίζομαι, *agōnizomai*, “one who struggles”) exercised self-control and discipline in preparation for events, all competing for the crown (στέφανος, *stephanos*; 9:25). Paul urges the Corinthian Christians to train and compete as for the imperishable crown (cf. James 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4; Rev 2:10). Paul lived with purpose and disciplined his life “to sacrifice what he needed to sacrifice for the sake of the gospel, lest he himself be disqualified from the race and fall short of the wreath of eternal life (9:25).”¹⁶

Connection and Application

As a teacher and an apostle, Paul had the “right” to receive compensation, just as the Corinthian Christians had certain “rights.” However, Paul shows that though he has a right, he does not exercise his right lest it become an obstacle or stumbling block to the gospel message. In the same way, the Corinthian Christians ought not to take full advantage of their rights should it cause one of weaker faith to stumble. This, for the sake of the gospel, and for the sake of that person for whom Christ died. While Paul did not compromise his identity in Jesus, he lived in such a way that appealed to many different types of people. Careful not to get in the way of the gospel, his goal was their salvation. We are called to love people where they are and to deliberately live out the gospel in their context. Walking in obedience to Jesus, we must set aside our rights, preferences, and perhaps our comfort, becoming all things to people, for the sake of the gospel, that by all means we may lovingly point others to Jesus.

¹² Fee, 463.

¹³ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 418.

¹⁴ Paul uses three different words for “servant” describing apostles and preachers of the gospel in 1 Corinthians—διάκονος (*diakonos*, “intermediary”; 1 Cor 3:5), ὑπηρέτης (*hyperetes*, “helper/assistant”; 4:1), and δουλόω (*doulōō/doulos*, “slave/indebted servant”; 9:19). In Gal 5:13, he writes to the church, “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve (δουλεύω) one another.”

¹⁵ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 1 Co 9:24-25.

¹⁶ Keener, 1 Cor 9:26-27.