

LESSON 13

1 Corinthians 9

In chapter 8 Paul began addressing questions raised by the Corinthians related to the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. They knew his teaching on the subject based upon his sojourn among them. They raised two arguments against his teaching. First, as discussed in chapter 8, they took his teaching out of context and misapplied it, thus using Paul's own words against him. But secondly, they argued that even if this was not his teaching, they didn't need to listen to Paul anyway because he lacked apostolic authority. It is this issue that Paul addresses in chapter 9. While his arguments in chapter 9 are strong, those in chapter 9 are even stronger. Paul vehemently contends for his rights as an apostle. After establishing his "right," however, Paul does not argue to receive support. To the contrary, he argues for his "right" to reject their support.

Some conclude from this that Paul is merely demonstrating another example of his willingness to give up his rights for the sake of others. Such an understanding sells Paul's argument short. First, there is no indication that he is urging the Corinthians to follow his example. Vv. 26-27 are not to the contrary because there he moves on to another issue. Second, at least half of his argument (vv. 1-14) does not fit that scheme at all. The vigor of Paul's argument is not the manner in which one normally encourages others to follow his example. Additionally, vv. 15-18 are too emotionally charged for them to function as exemplary.

More likely, as suggested above, this is a continuing response to the Corinthians' letter. They challenge his prohibition of attendance at pagan temples on two grounds: (1) the theological arguments addressed in chapter 8, followed by (2) questioning his apostolic authority addressed in chapter 9. His apostolic authority is questioned on two bases: (1) Paul refused to accept support from them (cf. 2 Cor. 12:13), and (2) Paul appeared to be of two minds on market place food, eating it in Gentile settings while declining it in Jewish settings (cf. vv 19-22). Paul meets the issue head-on. His defense is centered around the first two questions of chapter 9, which he answers in reverse order. He is an apostle (vv. 1b-14), and his apostleship gives him the right to give up his "right" to their material support (vv. 15-18), and to eat or reject food of any kind (vv. 19-23).

1. *In defense of his apostleship. Vv. 1-2.*

Verse 1 -- It is easy to miss that in 8:13 Paul changes to the first person. He continues with the first person in the opening questions of chapter 9. The opening question is the crucial one, but before he can address that he must first of all establish his apostleship by answering the second.

Chapter 9 opens with four rhetorical questions, to each of which, based on the Greek grammar, Paul expects an affirmative answer. The questions demonstrate that the problem lies around authority/freedom (*exousia*, recall the discussion from chapter 8:9) and being free (*eleutheros*) – not only theirs, but his, as we shall see in vv. 19-23 and later in 10:29b-30. While Paul ultimately uses himself as an example of the proper use of freedom, his main purpose here is to defend his apostleship and his own conduct.

Paul's view of apostleship is contained in the next two questions.

1. Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Along with 15:8, this question establishes two things. (A). Paul believed that his experience on the road to Damascus was more than a vision – it was a resurrection appearance. Since it followed the ascension, it was “out of due season” (15:3-8). (B). Since others saw the risen Lord and did not become apostles, Paul had undoubtedly told the Corinthians that Jesus’ appearance to Paul was accompanied by a commission. Acts 9:15; 22:10; 26:15-18; Gal. 1:16.
2. Are not ye my work in the Lord? Paul will argue this again in chapter 10:13-16 against those who had come in to bother the church in Corinth. Paul’s point here is that the very existence of the church in Corinth authenticates his apostleship. Paul enlarges this argument in v. 2.

Verse 2 – This verse demonstrates that Paul is not merely defending the freedom to make the choices described in 8:13, but is a rigorous defense of his apostleship that has been called into question. That much is clear. What is not clear is the reference to “others.” It may be no more than a hypothetical possibility that some other than the Corinthians may have reason to question his apostleship. It may be a reference to some outsiders who had come into Corinth questioning Paul’s authority. 2 Cor. 10-12. Of course, it could be both. There are certainly suggestions that outsiders had come into Corinth, *i.e.*, the slogans of 1:12, the “many guardians” of 4:15, and the “others” who share their *exousia*, 9:12. Whichever it is, Paul still seems to address the problem here as an inside problem in the church. “Others” may have doubts, but your very existence is evidence of my apostleship. In fact, he argues, the Corinthians are the very seal (ownership or authentication) of his apostleship. As with the final question in v. 1, he adds “in the Lord.” If he is not truly an apostle, they are not truly “in the Lord.”

2. *Paul’s apostolic rights. Vv. 3-14.*

Vv. 3 – 6. With a series of questions Paul addresses his right to their material support, a right that he will later argue he has the freedom to reject. Philosophers and wandering missionaries in the Greco-Roman were supported by fees, patronage, begging, and working. Each method had its own proponents each believing that all other methods are not worthy. We cannot be certain why Paul chose as he did. Some speculate that since Paul’s defense in 1 Thess. 2:1-12 bears likeness to the philosophical debates of the day, that something happened in Thessalonica that made him realize the need to be careful about his means of livelihood lest the gospel itself come into disrepute. This is not to say that Paul did not work before Thessalonica, nor that he did not accept material support from those whom he converted. The evidence, however, is that accepting support was from this time forward. Acts 18:3; 20:34; 1 Thess. 2:9; 1 Cor. 4:12. When some came into Corinth accepting material support, it highlighted Paul’s refusal and demeaned both himself and the Corinthians in the eyes of the Corinthians, thus causing offence. 2 Cor. 11:7. The Corinthians apparently argued that Paul refused patronage not because he renounced his right, but because he had no right. Thus, they argued, he was not a true apostle.

In the face of this argument, Paul does not begin with a defense of his right to renounce patronage, but with a defense of his right to receive patronage. He begins with

a series of three rhetorical questions, the point of which is found in v. 6 – he has the right not to work for a living, but to receive their support. Apparently there was an inquiry or investigation being conducted in Corinth. See 4:3-4. The questions were designed to make them acknowledge what they already knew – that he in fact possessed the rights of an apostle. “Food and drink” is not so much related to meat sacrificed to idols as it is to sustenance – his right to support. His right to lead about a wife as other apostles, the Lord’s brothers, and Cephas extends the right to support to his family had he chosen to be married. His not having a wife says nothing about his apostleship. While we cannot know whether Peter ever visited Corinth, this passage implies that he might have and that, if he did, his wife was with him.

The third question puts the argument in focus – “Are Barnabas and I the only ones who do not have the right not to work?” All of the questions address this issue. Paul has the right to have them supply his daily needs (Q1), to have a wife who would travel with him on his missionary journeys (Q2), and not to have to work at a trade in order to make ends meet (Q3). He now proceeds to illustrate this right.

V. 7. Three illustrations from common sense – the soldier, the farmer, and the shepherd. In everyday life one expects to be sustained by his labors. So with Paul. He has the right to expect to be supported from his “flock.” The church owes its existence to him.

V. 8. The scripture supports this right. This question has two parts, the first of which expects a negative answer and the second of which expects an affirmative answer. Paul’s argument is not based on mere human reasoning, it is supported by scripture.

Vv. 9 – 10. Paul cites Deut. 25:4 to demonstrate the support of Scripture. The Israelites were forbidden to muzzle the ox. Even the ox was entitled to a material benefit from its labor. Some suggest that Paul was denying that God had any concern for the ox, overlooking the elliptical nature of the sentence. “Doth God take care for oxen *only*, or saith he it altogether *also* for our sake?” Moreover, the first part of the question exists to set up the second part, “or does it (the Law) undoubtedly (assuredly, by all means) speak for our benefit?” God laid down a law based upon a principle. That principle is not (and never was) limited to the specific application included in the law. As expressed in 10:11, and in keeping with Paul’s view of the salvation event in the death of Christ, that which was written was written for those upon whom the end of the ages had come. He concludes with two applications of the principle: the plowman who plows and the thresher who threshes ought to do so in hope of sharing in the harvest. They should expect to share in the benefits of their labor.

Vv. 11-12a. Paul now applies what he has said to the situation at hand. Since he has sown a spiritual seed among them, it is no big thing if he reaps a material (carnal) benefit. This application, especially the use of “it is no big thing” or “is it too much”, makes it clear that Paul is contending with them and not simply setting himself up as an example. The final question (12a) puts everything into focus. “Others” have been receiving the kind of benefit that Paul is arguing for as his own “right.” His failure to accept patronage made it appear as if he did not have the right to such. On the basis of

his analogies and especially the farming analogy in v. 11, Paul turns it around on them. If “others” (those receiving patronage, *i.e.*, reaping) have such rights, my having sown the gospel among you only means that I have them all the more.

Vv. 12b – 14. Paul now begins to explain why he did not use this “right” as others did. He will give a fuller explanation in vv. 15-18, but before he does he gives two more illustrations of the fact of his “rights” (vv. 13-14). The two illustrations are preceded by a statement of purpose for his choices – that the gospel not be hindered. Whatever Paul did, he did not want to obstruct in any manner the spread of the gospel. In vv. 19-23 he will state the purpose positively – for the sake of the gospel. For Paul, when it came to a choice between his “rights” and others hearing the gospel, there was no choice at all. He laid aside anything and everything that could possibly stand in the way of someone’s willingness to listen to the story of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Paul does not state what hindrance he had in mind, but since it was related to his “right” to receive material support, he may have not wanted to be perceived in the same manner as itinerate philosophers of the day. He may have wanted to be a living illustration of the free grace of God.

But before he proceeds with his argument, there are two other illustrations that support his argument even more strongly. Up to now his argument has proceeded on the basis of analogies – soldier, vinedresser, shepherd, threshing ox, plowman/thresher, and sower/reaper. Before returning to a word from the Lord that speaks to the situation (v. 14), Paul has one more analogy, but this time very comparable to his situation – the ministrants of the temples. “Do you not know,” he asks, to underscore the fact that they do know. The practice was the same in Jewish and pagan temples – the priests who offered the sacrifices and those who waited at the altar shared in the sacrificial food.

Paul drives his argument home with a word from Jesus. “Even so,” just like it has always been, the Lord ordained that those who proclaim the gospel should live by the gospel. Paul is referring to Jesus’ words when He commissioned the 70. Luke 10:7 (“the laborer is worthy of his hire”); Matt. 10:10 (“the workman is worthy of his meat”).

As with Paul, those today who give themselves to “the work of the ministry” are deserving of material support. The whole reason for Paul’s argument is to establish that his giving up material support does not mean that he is not entitled to it. The key for everything to Paul, as it must be for us, is to be certain that there is no hindrance to the gospel. The bottom line must always be Christ, not whether the budget is met.

Apostolic restraint. Vv. 15-18.

Having strenuously argued for his “right” to material support, Paul now argues just as strenuously for his “right” to give it up. The fact is that this has been his point all along.

V. 15. Paul’s confrontational defense is not to be understood as an effort to obtain material support. To the contrary, it is a defense of his “right” forced upon him by the Corinthians denial of his apostolic authority. Having established that “right,” he now asserts that he has not used any of that power. So strong is his desire for them to understand that he is not now seeking material support that he declares that it would be

better for him to die than that any man should take away or make his glorying void. His glorying is not in contrast to what others have done in accepting patronage; it is in his not hindering the gospel (v. 12b) and in making the gospel “free of charge” when he proclaims it (v. 18). Thus, though indirectly, Paul’s glorying is in the cross. 1 Cor. 1:30-31; Gal. 6:14.

v. 16. The “for” indicates that Paul intends this verse to be an explanation of v. 15. Even if he preaches the gospel all of the time, he has nothing whereof to glory. The reason is because “necessity” is laid upon him. Note this is not the typical “inner compulsion” “call” to preach. Neither was it because as the chief of sinners he persecuted the church. His statement most likely may be traced to the Damascus Road and the events that followed. In short, the Lord had laid the burden on Paul to be an ambassador to the Gentiles. Gal. 1:15-16. He could not glory because his preaching was not a voluntary activity; it was something that God required of him. From that time forward preaching the gospel was his calling and his compulsion. God had taken hold of him. Phil. 3:12. So much is this so, he declares, that “woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel.” Woe here is nothing so trivial as inner distress; failure to preach brings divine judgment upon him for refusing the purpose for which God had laid hold on him.

v. 17. Paul now explains the compulsory nature of his task asserted in v. 16. There are two bases upon which a task may be performed – slave or free. If one performs a task voluntarily as a free man, he is entitled to a reward or pay. On the other hand, if the task is performed involuntarily as a slave, no pay is due. Paul echoes the words of Jesus in Luke 17:10.

v. 18. Paul’s next question seems out of place since he has declared that no reward or pay is due. What reward is due to one who is due no reward? His answer is that his reward is doing something that was not laid upon him – preaching the gospel free of charge. His “pay” is to receive “no pay.” This, however, gives him freedom from all so that he might more freely make himself a slave to everyone (v. 19). Paul has the “right,” but he will forgo it and offer the gospel free of charge so that he will not abuse his power (his “right” to material benefit or to live by the gospel). In so doing, Paul’s preaching became itself an example of the free gift of God. Rom. 5:15-18.

Paul’s argument is now back where it began. The Corinthians have seen his restraint in making use of his apostolic *exousia* to patronage as his not having apostolic *exousia* at all. Paul has argued that he does indeed have that *exousia*, but for him use might be viewed as misuse. Thus he has refrained for the sake of the gospel. But this policy has also set him free from merely human restraints. He now returns to the theme of freedom (v. 1) and explains how his foregoing his “rights” has enabled him to be a servant of all in the proclamation of the gospel.

Paul’s apostolic freedom. Vv. 19-23.

Several explanations have been offered for these verses. Because of the reference to the “weak,” some view it as a return to 8:13 where Paul offers himself as an example

of restraint for the sake of others. Others find an affinity to vv. 15-18 and view it as a final word on the issue of his not taking material support. They find Paul's "pay" as the opportunity to find as many as possible for the gospel. Neither solution is entirely satisfactory. While there are clear affinities between these verses and vv. 15-18, there are very few in the actual content of the two paragraphs. Vv. 15-18 deal with Paul's right to give up material benefits, while vv. 19-23 deal more with his stance on social relationships in various kinds of settings. This being so, this paragraph may look back to those who are examining (judging) him in v. 3. Paul is still defending his apostleship against those who are calling him into question. While vv. 19-23 will help even more to put his right to forego material benefits into focus, He has actually brought that discussion to a conclusion. Now he is concerned with conduct that the Corinthians consider too vacillating for an apostle, especially an apostle who would deny them the "right" to engage in pagan temple feasts that honor pagan gods with their friends. Thus Paul takes this occasion to explain his conduct, conduct that rests solely on the cause of evangelism, not on his right to do solely as he pleases. While the conduct in question was broader, the most immediate problem may have been Paul's attitude toward marketplace meat. Sometimes Paul ate; sometimes he didn't. This is a subject to which he most certainly returns in chapter 10.

v. 19. Paul returns to the opening question, "Am I not free?" He concluded that he was free from all men because, refusing material benefit, he was indebted to none. Now he declares that he has used his freedom to become a slave to all men. As Christ's slave, he works for free. Working for free, he is free from human restraints on his ministry. In other words, he is financially independent. Why would a free man become a slave? Because his goal was not freedom, it was the proclamation of the gospel. Jesus himself is the supreme example of such servanthood. Free to become a slave to all is the ultimate expression of truly Christian. It is truly Christ like behavior. Paul's first concern is not whether he offends (Gal. 4:16) or does not offend – although that is a concern (10:32) – but whether the gospel will get its proper hearing (10:33).

v. 20. Paul now proceeds to delineate what being a slave to all means by describing the social settings in which he practiced evangelism. To the Jews he became a Jew? How does Jew become like a Jew? This certainly includes Jewish practices that Paul long ago abandoned as having nothing to do with one's relationship with God. This would include circumcision (7:19; Gal. 6:15), food laws (8:8; Gal. 2:10-13; Rom. 14:17; Col. 2:16), and special observances (Col. 2:16). Paul yielded to Jewish customs for the sake of the Jews (Acts 16:1-3; 21:23-26). On the other hand, when Jewish practices and customs were imposed as conditions of salvation, *e.g.*, circumcision, Paul condemned it with vehemence. (Gal. 2:3-5; 5:12, older translations speak more "politely" in v. 12; "cut off" in the King James and "go beyond circumcision" in the ASV equate to "emasculate" (NIV) and "mutilate" (NASB).)

The second item is most likely a reference to the Jewish law, perhaps more specifically to Jewish legal requirements. To the observer there is no difference in conduct, but there is a world of difference in motive. Jews abstain from unclean animals because they are under the law; Paul abstains because he wants an opportunity to reach them with the gospel. Despite appearances, the differences are great. Paul does add a

phrase that the KJV reader misses – “not being myself under the law” (ASV). Clearly he wants his Gentile readers to understand that they are not under the law, and he wants his Jewish readers to understand that, by his actions, he does not endorse binding the law or any portion of it as a condition of salvation.

V. 21. The third item is the opposite of the second – those who are not under law. Paul is referring to his conduct among Gentiles, which would include the majority of the Corinthian church, a part of which were those who opposed him. This may refer to his eating market place meat without questioning its origin. He qualifies “not under law” however, by reminding them that he is not lawless – he is under law to Christ. Those in our day who insist that the Christian is under grace only and is not under any law seem to have overlooked this verse. More accurately, they have seen it but have chosen to ignore it. Should they argue that Christ has not given laws, but ethical demands, they have descended to a game of semantics unworthy of a student of the word of God.

V. 22. The final item in Paul list is the “weak.” This is the hardest group to identify. Paul may be being the argument back around to where he left it at 8:13-9:1. This has some appeal, especially if the third group represents those with whom Paul is in conflict in Corinth and to whom his arguments have been addressed. At the same time, however, Paul speaks of winning them, which makes that application difficult. Note that Paul does not say here, as he has with the other categories, that he has become “as” or “like” the weak. He says that he became weak. Perhaps this is a more general category, more social than religious. For any number of reasons, Paul became weak in Corinth (see 2:1-5; 4:9-13; cf. 2 Cor. 4:7-18; 11:16-12:10).

In any case the final sentence that he has become all things to all men so that by all possible means he might win some summarizes and generalizes the argument. Paul’s actions, which seem inconsistent to the Corinthians, have integrity at a far higher level. For Paul, everything is subordinated to this central concern of his life, this destiny that God has laid upon him (v. 16).

v. 23. The argument concludes with a summary of the singular passion of his life. The context makes it clear that Paul is not just referring to the content of the gospel, but to the proclamation of the gospel as God’s power to save at work in the world. Rom. 1:16-17. All that he does is with one aim – to save others and to share with them the eternal blessings and benefits of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Exhortation and example. 9:24-27.

But such is not guaranteed. He and they must persevere in the gospel to share in its promises. By the closing of his argument Paul’s attention has been turned to his own desire to share in the final blessings of the gospel, and that leads him directly to an exhortation that they, too, run in such a way as to get the prize, lest they be disqualified.

v. 24. This final paragraph is transitional. It brings the argument of chapter 9 to a conclusion and at the same time prepares for a return to the argument against going to the cultic meals in chapter 10. the entire paragraph consists of athletic metaphors.

V. 24 begins with the final “Do you not know” of the letter. Its use looks back to Paul’s preceding arguments and brings them into focus with an illustration – runners in the games who compete for a single prize. While many points can and have been made from this passage, some of which may be subsumed in Paul’s purpose, Paul’s point looks primarily to the self-control that is necessary to prepare for the race and win the prize. His concern is focused. It is stated in the exhortation to “So run, that ye may obtain.” It looks back to the intent to win the prize, forward to the preparation that is necessary to win the prize, and identifies the prize for which we run.

v. 25. This verse makes two points: 1) the necessity of self-control to win the prize and 2) the identity of the prize. The word the KJV translates “temperate” means “self-controlled, continent” according to Strong’s. The ESV translates, “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.” “Temperate” or “temperance” has now come to apply to only one aspect of self-control. Paul’s view here is broader. Winning requires discipline. Every athlete entered in the games was required to spend ten months of strict training and was disqualified if he failed to do so. For the Corinthians, this meant giving up some rights for the sake of others (8:7-13), but it also meant giving up some things altogether because they are inherently incompatible with the Christian “race” (10:14-22).

Paul presses the point by contrasting the prizes – a perishable prize versus one that is incorruptible. While many lessons emerge from the contrast, the overarching lesson here is that the value of the prize for which we run is of such value that it ought to affect the manner in which we live in the present.

v. 26. Paul now applies the principles to his own life – “I therefore so run.” Paul here holds himself out as exemplary. The metaphors from running and boxing both make the same point. Paul makes his point negatively – not running aimlessly and not shadow boxing or beating the air – but absurdity of the metaphors make the point stronger. He participates with a goal – he strives to win the prize (v. 24). They are to understand his actions as those of one who has a clear vision of his goal and who exercises self-control in all things for the single purpose of obtaining it. He presses this point in the final application of the metaphor in v. 27.

v. 27. He exercises self-control over his body to make it serve his purpose. Literally, he leads it into captivity or slavery. He does not endorse ascetic self-flagellation; he undoubtedly refers to the hardships that he endured in preaching the gospel to the Corinthians and elsewhere. In this way he “disciplined” his body “for the sake of the gospel” so that he might share with them in the promises of the gospel. He endures all things for the sake of the gospel that, even after preaching to others, he might not be disqualified. I wonder what Paul would say to many who claim to be Christians today who have lost sight of the goal and are running aimlessly, if they are still running at all?

But does Paul really believe that one who has actually entered the race can ever be disqualified? Some say no, but can language ever make clearer what Paul does in fact believe? It is the sheerest of folly to suggest that Paul’s warnings are not real. He will tell the Corinthians in his second letter (5:11) that he persuades men because he knows the terror of the Lord, but Paul was not one to persuade or warn because of a non-existent or

existent but impotent “boogeyman.” Paul calls the Corinthians “brethren” over and over again. Who will dare say that this inspired appellation is meaningless because, should they be disqualified, there were never saved, *i.e.*, never in the race? In fact, if those who were saved could never be disqualified and those who were disqualified were never saved, why write the letter at all? It was all a waste of time if it had absolutely no chance or changing that which was already eternally determined.