

The Church's Bill of Surrendered Rights

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 June 2017

Preacher: David Ely

[0 : 0 0] Good afternoon. Welcome to our Lunchtime Bible Talk. So this afternoon we'll be reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 9. So if you could turn with me now to this chapter. And I will start our reading from chapter 8 verse 12.

And I'll read through to chapter 9 verse 14. So thus sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat lest I make my brother stumble. Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?

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. This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to eat and drink?

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? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?

[1 : 1 1] 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? Do I say these things on human authority?

Does not the law say the same? 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?

Does he not speak entirely 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.

If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? 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.

[2 : 1 1] 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? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

Amen. Let's pray now as we come to God's word. Heavenly Father, thank you for your word.

And thank you that you reveal yourself so clearly through it. Please help us now as we come to learn from it. May your spirit work in our hearts to help us understand.

And may we come to know you more through it today. In Jesus name. Amen. I have my rights. And I will make sure that I get what I deserve.

No matter the cost. This is a common sentiment. Even if we don't say it out loud, we feel it when we think our rights are threatened.

[3 : 17] But this is not a new thing. In fact, it was alive and well in Corinth nearly 2,000 years ago. We can see it here in Paul's letter to the church there.

In this letter, Paul is concerned about the behavior of the Corinthian Christians. And one particular concern is how the Corinthians are acting in this area of rights.

He is concerned that their behavior is laying out obstacles in the way of the gospel. Now, in chapter 8, Paul has spent quite a long time dealing with this.

And he has been using the example of food that has been sacrificed to idols. Some Corinthians had been eating such food. And they were saying that the idols had no real existence.

And so a sacrifice to them meant nothing. The meat was no different from any other meat. But this behavior was causing other Christians to sin.

[4 : 17] Eating the meat may not have been wrong in itself. But it led others to stumble. It was getting in the way of the work of the gospel. The Corinthians believed they had a right to eat whatever food they wanted.

But Paul wants them to see that even if they do have this right, they should be willing to give it up for the sake of the gospel. For the sake of the gospel, they should count that right as nothing.

Now, at first glance, Paul seems to move on to a completely new topic at the start of chapter 9. But look ahead quickly to the second half of verse 12. And we see, 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. We see here the same language of rights and obstacles that Paul has been using throughout chapter 8.

It seems that Paul isn't quite finished with this issue. In fact, here at the start of chapter 9, Paul is expanding and supporting his argument from the previous chapter.

[5 : 27] And he does this using an example from his own ministry amongst them. The Corinthians are causing problems by standing on all of their rights.

But through his example, Paul aims to show them that this is not the way of the Christian life. So let's take a closer look at his argument.

From verse 1 through to the first half of verse 12, Paul is making his first point. And his first point is this, that he has a legitimate right.

So what right does Paul claim? Well, Paul and Barnabas have the right to material support. Look at verses 4 to 6 and see what he claims. Paul says he has the right to food and drink.

He has the right to bring a believing wife along with him. He has the right to not have to do other work for a living. Now, it's all very well Paul claiming these things.

[6 : 30] But is it true? Does Paul really have the right to these things? Well, Paul now spends the best part of 12 verses making it absolutely clear that he does.

If his example is to have any impact, there needs to be no doubt that he really has this right. So firstly, look at verses 1 and 2.

Paul says he is an apostle. And because Paul is their apostle, they can trust what he says to them here. Now, false teachers in Corinth were claiming special spiritual insights.

But Paul's authority to teach comes from the Lord Jesus himself. Why should the Corinthians trust his words over the special knowledge of the false teachers?

Because he is an apostle of Christ himself. And how can the Corinthians be sure he is an apostle? Well, the Corinthians themselves are proof of it.

[7 : 34] Paul calls them his seal of apostleship. The Corinthians and their growth in the gospel are the fruit of Paul's apostleship.

They really can trust what he says. Paul's second offense relates to what the Corinthians see all around them. Who works at their own expense?

Regular soldiers rarely fight for nothing. They expect to be rewarded for their work. Generally, they do not serve at their own expense. Likewise, the farmer doesn't plant a crop for the sake of it.

They expect to get something out of it. They expect in some way to get their living from the fruit. But do the other gospel workers expect support?

Or does Paul claim something here that no one else is claiming? Well, look at verses five and six. The other apostles all have rights. Peter, the brothers of the Lord, and all the others are allowed to take along a believing wife.

[8 : 39] Why are Paul and Barnabas any different? By looking around them, the Corinthians can see that Paul has a real right.

But Paul goes further. Not only does the world around them prove he has this right, but the law of God itself upholds it. He claims this right not just by human authority, but by the authority of God.

Have a look at verse nine. Moses commands that oxen should be allowed to eat some of the grain they are working. The ox should benefit from the work that it is doing.

And if the law applies to cows, how much more does it apply to us? We begin now to see just how rightful Paul's claim is.

Not just because he is an apostle. It doesn't just stand on human authority. But ultimately, because God himself has given workers this right.

[9 : 44] Paul's line of argument reaches something of a conclusion in verses 11 and 12. Have a look at these verses. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?

If others share this rightful claim, do we not even more? Paul and Barnabas have sown a great thing in their lives. They have sown the gospel.

It is the work that they have done that is responsible for the new life the Corinthians have. Others who have served them deserve their wages. But Paul's work among them has achieved something far greater.

So how much more legitimate is their claim for support? Now, all of this adds up to form a weighty argument. Paul and Barnabas undoubtedly have a right to be provided for.

As much as anything is a right, this is one. And the weight of this argument is what gives verse 12 its force.

[10 : 50] 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. When we see how strong their claim is, we see the surprise of this verse.

And this is Paul's second and his main point. That he has surrendered his right. Despite the complete legitimacy of their claim, Paul and Barnabas are willing to let it go.

It may be their right, but they have not claimed it. And why? Well, this brings Paul back to the big point he has been trying to make.

They have not claimed this right so that there is no obstacle in the way of the gospel. Paul wanted his gospel to be above reproach. He wanted to make sure he couldn't be accused of seeking material gain.

If he had claimed this right in Corinth, some may have assumed he was a false teacher. These were teachers seeking to get rich from falsehood. And as a result, people may have distrusted his words.

[12 : 00] The work of the gospel would be damaged. And this is the greatest of all Paul's concerns that the gospel would advance and bear fruit. The work of the gospel is his overwhelming priority.

The Corinthians have been fixated on exercising their rights. But Paul is willing to give up any right for the sake of the gospel. Notice to what great lengths Paul is willing to go.

He would rather endure anything than damage the work of the gospel. And we know that these aren't empty words. When we look at Paul's ministry, we see that he really was willing to endure anything.

Now, how different is this to the attitude of the Corinthians? Paul is concerned first and foremost about the progress of gospel work. Now, which of these two attitudes is most like ours today?

Outside the church, the attitude is overwhelmingly Corinthian. Rights are a big thing. And it would be naive to think that society's attitudes don't creep into the church.

[13 : 13] Now, I must be clear. Having rights is not a bad thing. This is not what Paul is saying. He is not telling the Corinthians that people don't have rights. And he is not telling them to deny people their rights.

But Paul is warning the Corinthians away from prioritizing their own rights. Especially when these hinder the work of the gospel. As Christians, we need to hold our own rights loosely.

For example, think of how we respond when someone in the church hurts us. What is our attitude when injustice has been done to us?

Now, we have the right to an apology and the right to some form of justice. And for most of us, our natural reaction would be to stand on that right.

We want to make sure we get the justice we deserve. But perhaps in many cases, we should be free with our forgiveness instead. The way we act towards one another either clarifies or confuses the gospel.

[14 : 19] And how we love one another within the church is a key part of our witness to Christ. For the sake of the gospel, the Christian should be willing to give up his rights.

And Paul's original examples still stand. In some situations, it may be right for a gospel worker to deny payment. Perhaps in a place where the prosperity gospel is proving to be a significant problem.

Associating true gospel ministry with money may damage the witness to Christ. In such a scenario, the Christian should be willing to surrender his right.

And what about the example set for us by Paul's life? Paul had the right to physical safety and security. But for the sake of the gospel, he was willing to suffer.

He was willing to surrender his right to a safe life to make the gospel known. Look at his words in verse 12. He is willing to endure anything for the sake of the gospel.

[15 : 23] Now, at a basic level, we have the right to a physically safe life. But to make the good news of Jesus Christ known, we should be willing to follow Paul's example.

For the sake of the gospel, we should be willing to endure anything. After all, we follow Jesus Christ. Who set aside more rights than we ever could.

Setting aside all that he deserved to save us who are dead. So Paul's message here is clear. Christians, be ready to sacrifice any of your rights for the sake of the gospel.

This is Paul's big message to each of us. He has built his case and brought home his point in verse 12. And we might be tempted to think that this is the end of the matter.

But surprisingly, in verse 13, Paul briefly turns his attention back to the support of gospel workers. And this brings us on to our third point. The right still stands.

[16 : 27] Paul and Barnabas have not made use of this right. They have not claimed any material support from the Corinthians. However, the right still stands.

Paul and Barnabas have chosen to be exceptions to a principle. The gospel worker should be provided for materially. If we don't believe it, we should reread verses 1 to 12.

All of Paul's arguments still stand. And if we have any doubt, Paul offers one more example. Those who work in the temple get their food from the temple.

Once again, this was the God-given command of the law. The generosity of God's people was to provide for the priests. And to make Paul's thoughts on the matter completely clear, we have verse 14.

The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living from the gospel. Now we must be clear, the command is absolutely not to make gospel workers rich.

[17 : 36] It is to support them and their families so that they can commit wholly to proclaiming the gospel. Is that the attitude we take to our gospel workers?

We are rightly willing to pay a plumber for fixing a pipe. But are we hesitant to pay a preacher who brings the word of God? Words that can fix broken and sin-stained lives.

Now, of course, the principle here applies much more broadly than this. Christians should not stand on their rights when the gospel is at stake. But as the church, we should make sure we don't abuse this godly attitude.

For example, it is good for a Christian to give up Saturdays for the sake of gospel work. It is good to give up evenings for the sake of the gospel.

Willingness to do this is a good thing. But it is our responsibility as fellow believers to make sure that that willingness is not abused.

[18 : 41] Christians have a right to proper rest. And under normal circumstances, it is good that the church ensures this is met. Perhaps by giving up some of our own time so that other believers are not unfairly burdened.

Do you see the dual call of these verses? There is a clear call to each of us as individuals. Be willing to surrender any of our own rights for the sake of the gospel.

And then there is the call to make sure our brothers and sisters' legitimate needs are met. We can't surrender our brothers and sisters' rights for them.

We must take our responsibility seriously. So then, as we close, Paul's message here is twofold. Every Christian should be willing to give up any right for the sake of the gospel.

We must be willing to follow Paul's example. Willing to endure anything instead of placing a stumbling block in the way of the gospel. Nevertheless, the Lord has commanded that we support our gospel workers.

[19 : 49] Rights do exist. And we should rejoice in meeting the needs of our brothers and sisters. Are we heeding this dual call? Are we holding our own rights loosely so that the gospel message is clear?

Are we willing to endure anything so that many might be saved? And are we taking seriously our responsibility to meet the real needs of fellow believers?

As we do both of these things, we bring glory to Christ and we point others to him. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for the gospel that you have shared with us.

Thank you that your son laid down every right so that our sins might be forgiven. Thank you that he laid down every right so that we might be set free from slavery. We thank you, Father, for the example of Paul.

Help us to imitate him. Help us to be willing to surrender any right so that others might come to know Jesus Christ. And help us to care deeply for each other.

[21 : 02] Forgive us if we have abused the willingness and sacrifice of our brothers and sisters. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.