

Ministry Trumps Our Rights

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, good afternoon and welcome to our lunchtime Bible talk. It's good to see you all gathered here with us. We're going to continue on looking at 1 Corinthians chapter 9.
- We started looking at this little section on food sacrifice to idols last week. And we're going to get to the crux of the issue.
- Today. So whilst you're turning that up, let me pray. Father, we thank you that we can join together week by week to open your word together and to be confident that you speak to us.
- So as we do that now, we ask that you would be here with us and that it would be you speaking to us. Help us to lay aside all that might hinder us, all that might distract us.
- And help us to focus on what your word says, what it says to us. And on how to respond to you with our whole hearts. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.
- [1 : 1 7] Let's read 1 Corinthians chapter 9. Paul says, 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? 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. Is it for oxen that God is concerned?
- [2 : 3 2] Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake because the plowman should plow in hope and the 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- [3 : 4 5] 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.

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. What then is my reward?

That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as to not make full use of my right in the gospel. For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law, I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law.

To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law. To the weak, I became weak, that I might win the weak.

[4 : 52] If I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Do you not know that in a race, all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly.

I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified.

One of the great societal sins of our day is to impinge upon someone's rights. We're living in a time where autonomy is prized above almost anything else.

[5 : 59] And so everyone's rights to do what they want or to be who they think they want to be cannot be touched, or for doing that, you will be the villain of the day.

And so defending our rights to do what we want to do or must do is paramount in our society. Well, Paul spends a good bit of chapter 9 speaking about some of his rights and defending one of them in particular.

But in the end, he brings the cross to bear on his rights. And so he exemplifies what it is to live a truly spiritual life.

Because all along in this letter, we find the absolute importance of the cross of Christ and so Paul's pattern of ministry that is so completely shaped by that cross.

Throughout this letter, there's a contrast between Paul's pattern of ministry and the Corinthians pattern of ministry. Paul's pattern is faithful to both the preaching of the cross and to living a life that is marked in a costly way in this world's eyes by the weakness and foolishness of the cross.

[7 : 13] Paul's pattern was the cross now and glory to come. Cross now and resurrection in the future. So in this world, Paul was characterized by words like foolish, weak, dishonor.

And we find those all throughout this letter to the Corinthians. The Corinthians, however, on the other hand, had begun to move on from Paul. They were marked by glory now, resurrection now.

In their minds, they had become spiritual kings. And so the kinds of words that described them throughout this letter are words like wise, powerful, honored.

They were marked with spiritual-looking gifts or abilities. They lived with the great victory of resurrection as if it was for now. And because the Corinthians have diverged from Paul on these things, they have tiers of spirituality in their church.

They draw a line through the church that separates the superior Christians from the weak ones. But Paul, on the other hand, he draws a line around the church that says, all Christians, all Christians have been enriched by Christ so that none are lacking.

[8 : 37] and we began to see last week how this plays out in the issue of food sacrifice to idols. The Corinthians, with their great knowledge, were happy to eat away at the food that had been sacrificed in the temple and they didn't really care about the weaker brothers who found this very difficult.

The weaker brothers who mightn't have been as clear in their knowledge about what an idol really was. Paul was saying last week that love is much more important than knowledge.

Love is much more important than knowledge. But in chapter 9, Paul moves on to say that ministry, the gospel going forth, is much more important than our rights.

Ministry trumps rights. A church must be much more concerned with the gospel growing than it is with its own rights and privileges. So first we see in verses 1 to 12, the right, Paul's right.

Paul states and defends his rights as an apostle and the chief right that he is defending is his right to be paid for his preaching ministry. Paul can hear the voices circling in Corinth as he engages in this argument.

[9 : 57] He knows they're already thinking that they're above him, so he offers a defense of his rights as an apostle. But in the end, he makes clear that his calling, his task that he's been given to do by God, his ministry, is much, much more important than these rights that he's defending.

So he says, verse 1, am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Implied answer, yes, of course I am. They may question it, but of course he is.

And above all people, they ought to know that more than anyone else. They were planted by Paul. They are, verse 2, as he describes it, they are the seal of his apostleship.

And that's key. Paul is an apostle. He had authority. But most important was that his pattern of ministry was exemplary. Corinth obsessed with all kinds of leaders, with who they would follow.

We read about that in chapter 1 and chapter 3. Some follow Cephas, some follow Apollo, some follow this leader, that leader. But not following Paul was not an option.

[11 : 12] Following Paul as an apostle meant following Jesus. So verse 4, does Paul have the right to eat and drink? Of course he does.

Does he have the right to a wife? Well, if the other apostles do, then of course he does. Look at verse 6. Does Paul have no right to stop working?

That is, to stop working and so be funded by the church? Or are he and Barnabas the only ones who have to keep on working as well as preaching? Paul's asking them the question, do I have the right to claim living expenses from the people I'm ministering to?

And he does. Paul has labored amongst the Corinthians. He's worked hard. He's preached to them. He's planted this church. And it's right that those who serve the Lord in that way are looked after for their needs.

Paying them is normal. They need to live. It shouldn't be an awkward thing to talk about paying preachers and looking after them. Verse 7. What soldier funds himself through battle?

[12 : 28] Or what vintner doesn't enjoy some of their own fruit? Or what farmer doesn't enjoy his own produce? Paul makes it absolutely clear that this is his right.

If his apostolic authority wasn't enough, he says, verse 8, the law says the same. After all, verse 9, even the ox is provided for in its work.

And Paul says, isn't that for our benefit? Verse 11, if we have sown spiritual things amongst you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?

Of course not. That's Paul's answer. Paul was entitled to be cared for materially. A laborer deserves his wages. So whilst others have this right claim on the Corinthians, Paul's asking, don't we have it even more?

But this isn't really why he's writing. All he's doing here is establishing that this is his right. He could claim this if he wanted. There will be times where a church must heed the defense of this right so that they do show that they value real ministry that follows Paul's pattern to show that they are responding to all that God has done for them and so that ultimately those who labor to bring God's word to the church week after week are able to keep on doing that free from the stress of having to earn a living and pay the bills alongside working hard at preaching.

[14 : 08] But Paul here having established his right goes on to relinquish it. That's what we see secondly verses 12 to 23 the right is relinquished.

Paul is telling us that he will hold his rights very loosely and will even give them up if it will in any way make the gospel clearer to the people he's ministering to.

So verse 12 we have not made use of this right. He hasn't and won't make use of it as long as it might make murky his ministry among them.

Corinth was a city that loved orators speakers preachers people who could speak publicly with great eloquence and clarity and the custom in this city at the time was that those who could do these things were rewarded by patrons so the better the speaker the more the salary and so the payment for speaking in these ways acted as some sort of status symbol.

Paul didn't take up his right instead we read in chapter 4 verse 12 that he labored with his own hands when he was spending time with them they saw him work hard with his hands so the Corinthians might be thinking how could Paul be an apostle how could he tell us what to do after all he has to build tents to get by his ministry isn't valued enough you can see for yourself he couldn't possibly be very spiritual not like us Corinthians but in spite of verse 14 in spite of the fact that God commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel Paul doesn't make use of it not because he can't but because he doesn't want their money he refuses their money in the interest of making the gospel clearer Paul is flexible for the sake of those who are in front of him

[16 : 15] Paul didn't want to be accused by those who weren't Christians of being driven by money he didn't want people to think that his preaching and speaking was just to get a better patron and isn't that what people think when they look at the charlatans on things like God TV who live in mansions they own private jets they're draped in gold it's hard to listen to them and take them seriously when it's so obvious that they're driven by money and so Paul does not want to have his ministry discredited over claiming his rights to be funded by them so his right to money was sacrificed so that the gospel might be more clear and more heeded Paul is driven by preaching the gospel in fact he can't not do it he's been given this job by God himself so doing what he has to do is no ground for boasting verse 16 because the truth for him is it is woe to him if he doesn't preach but his boasting comes from him doing it for free he can rightly claim provision for doing this it's what

God's commanded him to do it would be the right thing to have it but because he does it from his own will verse 17 because he preaches the gospel voluntarily as well as being commanded to do it he does get a reward his boast is that he offers the gospel free of charge no strings attached he constrains his right so that his preaching might be more effective so that more people will listen to him so there'll be less obstacles in the way of people responding to Jesus so that more people might be able to know Christ whom Paul's whole life is shaped around and so in the argument about food sacrifice to idols in these chapters Paul is free to eat and drink he has that freedom he's free to eat meat that's been sacrificed to an idol and he's free to claim money to live on from the

Corinthians but he doesn't do things that muddy the gospel for others the Corinthians will claim that Paul's inconsistent he changes what he does but Paul is completely consistent Paul will always be flexible if it benefits other people in the gospel and so Paul's correction for the Corinthians isn't simply about whether they should or shouldn't eat he isn't just telling them what to do instead he's concerned with what motivates them Paul's teaching them a principle that would correct their approach to this food and to many other issues the principle is that rights as Christians our freedoms as Christians are subordinate to our calling to make Jesus known verse 19 Paul says for though

I am free from all I have made myself a servant to all that I might win more of them to the point that he will not take money if it hinders to the point that he will not eat meat if it hinders the gospel look at verses 20 to 22 he uses three examples of his flexibility to the Jews I become as a Jew to win Jews so as much as it is not sinful for him to do it he will change what he does to help Jews understand the gospel he'll do the same for the Gentiles to the Gentiles who's outside the law I'll become as one of them as much as I'm allowed to while still being faithful to God and verse 22 to the weak to those who these superior Corinthians look down on to the weak Paul becomes weak to win the weak to make the gospel clear to the weak

Paul be flexible within his rights and freedoms for how it will best serve gospel ministry the Corinthians loved preachers they celebrated great preachers so as Paul was preaching amongst them he did so in a way that wasn't popular like the other orators he wasn't eloquent he wasn't impressive because he needed to make the gospel clearer in a city of preachers he wasn't just another preacher with just another message Paul was Christ's apostle with Christ's message of the cross and he exemplified Christ's pattern of life and so for the weak he does what is weak looking if taking up his freedom to have a bacon cheese burger meant that others would think that that is normal and end up back worshipping at the temple end up in destruction

[21 : 42] Paul says I will never eat a bacon cheese burger again I won't even look at one even if it has me salivating at the mouth because he says no steak no burger no amount of money compares to verse 23 sharing with brothers and sisters the blessings of the gospel even if he has to slog his guts out working hard at building tents even if he has to burn the candle at both ends he will do it because sharing the gospel is worth it and so Paul's message to us is that we must not buy into the spirit of the age we must not insist upon our rights we must not assert ourselves above all else how easy it is to hinder gospel ministry by doing this whether it be insisting that church works the way I want it to work I have the right to a church service that suits me so it needs to be in the location that

I want it to be in or it must have the hymns or the tunes that I want when I want them or maybe there's some evangelistic initiative that's happening to try and reach out with the gospel to people around the church but it means your favorite way of doing things has to change well Paul says our rights our freedoms must make way for the gospel Christians have great freedoms on all kinds of things but we must be flexible with them so sometimes a minister will have to refrain from having alcohol to make the gospel clearer but sometimes he might need to be seen in the supermarket with a bottle of wine in his trolley to make the gospel clearer or ladies are free to wear all kinds of clothes but they must be careful that asserting that freedom is not to the detriment of someone else keeping going with the gospel or we're free to have all kinds of friends but for the sake of the gospel we might need to adjust how much time we spend with other

Christians either to be more effective at reaching out with Jesus to people who aren't Christians or we might need to adjust it to better display the love that there is to be in the church as we are caring for other Christians things these these are all wisdom calls but the motivation has to be what can I best do to make the gospel clear we're free to get our heads down and work hard in our jobs to have some peace at work and at home amongst our neighbors to not be at odds with them to not have a difficult time but we can be flexible with that at times and curtail our freedom to have a peaceful life so that we invite our colleagues to read the Bible with us at lunchtime or to go to an event at church it might make things more difficult for us it might curtail that freedom to an easier life but it might just make the gospel that bit clearer for someone who needs to know

Paul is flexible with his rights because he follows Jesus pattern Jesus gave up his right to stay seated at God's side he humbled himself to walk amongst us as a human and to die for us so that people might be rescued Paul's concern just like Jesus concern was to bring the gospel to as many people as possible so that together they would enjoy all of its blessing that's what drives Paul in verse 23 and he can keep doing this even though the Corinthians couldn't possibly understand why he would limit himself for others and we can keep doing this we can keep giving up our rights even though the world around us looks on in confusion as to why we be prepared to give up who we are and what we have for others Paul can do that and we can do that because in the end there is a reward verses 24 to 27 there is an imperishable reward waiting for those who follow

Paul as he follows Jesus Paul says verse 24 there is a way of running that misses out on the prize Paul says don't miss out on the prize the Corinthians desire to be superior and to be set apart from other Christians with their superior knowledge with their flagrant spirituality with all of their rights Paul is saying that is heading towards missing the prize if you are more concerned with being the stand out Christian then you are running in the wrong way Paul says just like athletes discipline their bodies so as to claim the prize we are to show self control we're to limit ourselves in these ways we're to be flexible with our rights because whilst an athlete is competing for a wreath or a trophy that will ultimately pass away or be passed on to someone else who wins it next year he says we are pursuing an imperishable prize one that will last forever he's talking there about the resurrection that is to come what the Corinthians think they have now he's saying that is waiting for us in the future that's what we're chasing so Paul says the denial of things now so that we can keep running and keep helping the gospel to grow he says the discipline of loving others now more than ourselves and what we would like means that verse 26 we're not just beating the air like a boxer we're not like someone running aimlessly no we're pursuing as best we can this imperishable prize that will be ours

[28 : 17] Paul wants to get there and he knows that selfishly hindering others from getting there just because it'll be a bit easier for him or will suit him a little bit more means that he too will be disqualified because behind that attitude is what the Corinthians are doing so he says in verse 27 and so as we finish a church must be much more concerned with ministry with reaching out with the gospel to seeing people come to Jesus than on our own rights and freedoms that is costly Paul had to build tents as he worked hard at doing gospel ministry but it is patterns after the cross it's what Jesus himself did for us and if a church does that if

Christians do that that will bring other people to the cross as they are exemplifying the very heart of what the cross is and as a church or as a group of Christians do that that will lead to them gaining the imperishable prize amen let's pray father we thank you that you sent your son amongst us we didn't consider grabbing equality with you as worthwhile compared to coming amongst us living amongst us dying for us we pray that you would help us to follow his pattern that we might win many many more to the cross of

Christ we pray this in Jesus name amen amen