

"The Church in the World:  
Studies in 1 Corinthians" #9

## "Service and Rights"

1 Cor. 9:1-18

--NEFC 6/6/21

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Our journey through Paul's first letter to the Corinthians,  
interrupted as it was for over a year by covid,  
has taken us to all sorts of places.

We began, a long time ago, with the opening few chapters  
that focused on that church's rival factions—  
with some members following Paul,  
some following Peter, some Apollos, and some—  
those really "spiritual" types—only following Christ.  
It was not a pretty picture.

Then, in more recent weeks, we've seen Paul deal with  
a church member who was having a sexual relationship with his step-mother,  
and church members who were taking each other to court.

Then Paul addressed the problem of men having relations with prostitutes,  
then some going to another extreme and claiming that even married couples  
should refrain from sexual relations,  
and who believed it was inappropriate for Christians to get married  
or to stay married to unbelievers.

And then, as we saw last week,

there was the issue of whether it was proper for Christians

to engage in the elaborate dinners held in pagan temples.

And there are more issues to come.

But at this point I want to help you see the main point Paul is making in all of this—

it's all about a right understanding of the gospel.

This was a church with a host of problems,

and in every instance Paul's response was to expound the gospel.

In every case he points them to some aspect of the gospel

that applies to their situation.

Addressing their factions and in-fighting

caused by their pride in wisdom and knowledge,

Paul points to the true wisdom of God

which is displayed in the foolishness of the cross of Christ (1 Cor. 1:17-18).

Regarding the sexual immorality that was prevalent among them,

Paul urges them to get rid of the old leaven of sin from their midst,

for Christ the Passover Lamb has been sacrificed (5:7).

Through the gospel we are joined to Christ.

How, then, can they be joined to prostitutes?

"You were bought with a price," Paul says,

"now honor God with your body" (6:20).

On the issue of marriage,

Paul contends that the sexual union of a man and woman in marriage

is a good thing,

and that the gospel has a power

to overcome the defiling presence of an unbelieving spouse,

so there is no reason to leave the marriage in such circumstances.

More than that, you can serve God in whatever circumstance you are in—

whether married or single—

and singleness has its advantages.

You can live out the gospel wherever God has put you,

so don't be overly concerned about whether you are married or not (7:17-24).

After all, this world in its present form is passing away.

And as to eating food sacrificed in the pagan temples,

Paul will agree that the gospel sets us free

from laws about what we eat and what we drink (8:1-8).

**“food does not bring us near to God;**

**we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do”** (8:8).

But at the same time, true knowledge must issue in love,

for that's what knowledge of the gospel is about.

For the gospel is about God pouring his love out on rebellious sinners.

Time after time, Paul's response to the problems of this church

centers on the gospel and what it ought to mean in our lives.

So, following Paul,

my central role as your pastor is to keep the gospel in front of us—

the gospel in all its fullness.

The gospel is the good news that in his Son Jesus Christ

God has revealed his holy love to the world.

In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself.

In Christ, God has given us victory over the powers of sin and death.

In Christ, God has acted to bring us out from under his judgment  
and into a right relationship with himself.

Through Christ's death for our sin, we can be justified before him—

forgiven for all that we had done to offend him.

In Christ, we can come to know God as our Father in heaven.

In Christ, we can be given new life by his Spirit living within,  
changing us from the inside.

The gospel declares God's eternal purpose to create a people for himself  
who will be conformed to the image of his Son.

In Christ, we can be assured of a relationship with God that death cannot destroy.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is the gospel.

This gospel is the very centerpiece of the plan of God to restore and renew his creation.

The universe itself was created with Christ in mind.

He is the supreme revelation of God—his true image.

Jesus Christ reflects God in the world and so brings him glory.

Jesus Christ is the one through whom and for whom and to whom  
are all things.

Jesus Christ is the embodiment of the wisdom of God.

He is the key to the mystery of human existence,

giving us a reason for living.

Not only that, he gives us a hope for the future,

for in his resurrection glory he has revealed the destiny

of all who are joined to him by faith.

God's kingdom will come, his will will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

in and through Jesus Christ.

This is the gospel—the revelation of the grace and truth of God in Jesus Christ.

That's what has to be at the center of who we are as a church.

If we give that up, we have nothing. /

So you may come to me as your pastor with all sorts of problems in life,

but I need to make a confession:

I am a physician with but one medicine to prescribe,

and that is the gospel of Christ.

It may need to be applied in various ways,

and various aspects of it may need to receive the right emphasis,

and it may need to be administered in the right form.

But only the gospel of Jesus Christ can heal the deepest wounds of the human heart

and can enable us to prosper according to God's design.

Certainly, I'm not so naïve as to think that the gospel gives us

a quick and easy solution to all of life's problems,

nor that the gospel alone is the treatment for all of life's ills.

But I am saying that it is the ultimate answer

and the answer we most need if we are to have a real and final hope.

I believe that with all my heart,  
and I am sure that the Apostle Paul did also.

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So let's get back to the way Paul applies the gospel in our passage this morning  
in 1 Cor. 9.

As you recall from last week,  
in regard to eating meat sacrificed to idols,  
Paul concludes that your authority, your freedom,  
to act however you like in a certain situation  
doesn't mean that you should act however you like.

No, as a Christian you have a responsibility to act in a way  
that builds up your brother or sister.  
That's what love means.

Knowledge without love is not Christian knowledge at all,  
for our knowledge of Christ in the gospel  
is a knowledge of God acting in a gracious love  
toward those who don't deserve it.

We aren't to flaunt our freedom in Christ—  
we are to use it in ways that are best for others, not ourselves.

As we move to chap. 9 Paul will now use his own experience  
as an example of what he is talking about,  
and in the process, he will again demonstrate  
how the gospel is to shape the way we live. /

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His argument in the first 18 verses this chapter has two parts.

Paul begins with an affirmation of truth.

He establishes his right as an apostle to receive financial support  
from the Corinthian Christians.

He needs to establish this right in two stages:

First, he has to reaffirm his status as an apostle,  
for it appears that some in Corinth viewed him with some suspicion.

We talked about this in expounding the earlier chapters  
which we looked at pre-pandemic.

We all have some image, some picture in our heads  
of what a leader should look like.

The Corinthians' conception of a leader was shaped by  
the traveling professional speakers of their day, known as the Sophists,  
whose name comes from the Greek word for “wisdom”—*sophia*.

These leaders prided themselves on their wisdom, knowledge, and power  
as they gave lectures on how to live your best life now.

These Sophists could command a substantial fee  
for their worldly wisdom.

They were knowledgeable,  
and they spoke with great sophistication and rhetorical skill.

The Sophist set the standard for what a leader should look like.

So these Corinthian Christians weren't quite sure what to make of Paul--

Just who was this guy?

He called himself an apostle, but anyone could do that.

He wasn't much to look at.

You'd think that he'd at least act like an apostle--

for they expected an apostle to a powerful person,

a person of some prominence and prestige.

But look at Paul--

unlike the Sophists, and even unlike the other apostles,

Paul refused all pay or patronage for his preaching.

Instead, he engaged in manual labor to support himself--

he worked with own hands—

he made tents.

How degrading, they thought.

And rather than being a decisive leader who gave clear direction for his followers,

this man Paul seemed to waver and vacillate all over the map.

One minute he could be seen eating meat that had been sacrificed in the temple,

and the next he refused it--

it all depended on who he was with at the time!

He was nothing but a political people-pleaser!

"We have known some apostles," some of the Corinthian Christians would say,

"And this man Paul was no apostle.

Just who does he think he is trying to tell us how to live anyway?"

You can almost feel Paul's irritation with these people  
who suggest that because he didn't take pay for his labor among them  
that he wasn't a real apostle.

This discussion will be picked up quite passionately in Paul's second letter to them.  
Here he makes his case briefly--

"Oh course, I am an apostle!" he declares in the first verse of our passage--

**"Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?**

**Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?**

**Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you!**

**For you are the seal (the authenticating sign)**

**of my apostleship in the Lord" (vv.1-2).**

"This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me," he says.

In contrast to the false view of how an apostle ought to act—

that is, like the Sophists, the prosperity preachers of that day,

Paul asserts his own right to that title. /

But that assertion simply lays the groundwork for the real point he wants to make—

**As an apostle, Paul establishes his right**

**to receive financial support from these Corinthians Christians.**

v. 4—"Don't we have the right to food and drink?

**Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us,**

**as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas ?**

Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?"

And in vv. 4-14, Paul offers five different lines of argument

defending his right as an apostle,

to receive support from those to whom he ministered.

First, he gives the common sense examples of the soldier, the farmer, and the shepherd--

Everybody knows they have the right to be supported in what they do

and to receive the rewards of their labors.

v. 7—"Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?

Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes?

Who tends a flock and does not drink the milk?"

But more than this common practice,

Paul mentions a scriptural precept--

Doesn't the law of God say the same thing?

v. 9-- "For it is written in the Law of Moses:

"Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain."

Embedded in this Old Testament command about oxen

is the simple principle that the one who works

ought to share in the fruit of his labors.

In the law, the Israelites were given an illustration of this principle

in the way they were to allow the unmuzzled ox

to eat some of the grain that it was trampling on.

"Is it about oxen that God is concerned?" Paul asks.

"Surely he says this for us, doesn't he?"

“Yes, this was written for us,  
because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes,  
they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest.  
If we have sown spiritual seed among you,  
is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?

This is a matter of simple justice, Paul argues--

v. 12-- **If others have this right of support from you,  
shouldn't we have it all the more?"**

Isn't this the way it works, whether in the Jewish culture, or the Greek?--

v. 13--**"those who work in the temple get their food from the temple."**

More than that, isn't this what the Lord himself commanded--

v. 14--**"that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel."**  
"The laborer is worthy of his wages," Jesus had said (Lk. 10:17).

"Oh yes," Paul asserts, "I have a right to material support from you."

He is entitled to it.

He has a right to claim it for himself.

He wants to make this point very clear. /

That's the first half of his argument,

But that simply lays the foundation for what he really wants to say—

It's about what he has done with that right.

For twice Paul affirms that though he had a right to their support,

he had refused to exercise that right--

v. 12--"But we did not use this right."

v. 15--"But I have not used any of these rights."

And lest there be any misunderstanding about his motives in speaking about this,

lest they think that this is merely a disguised

anti-fund-raising fund-raising letter,

Paul quickly adds,

"And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me."

I don't want your money!

That's not why I am saying this.

I have refused to stand on my rights, and, he says in v. 15--

"I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast." /

But why?

Why, after he has argued so persuasively that he has a right to such support,

does he then give it up?

Look at v. 12, which is really the heart of everything he wants to say—

"But we did not use this right.

On the contrary, we put up with anything

rather than hinder the gospel of Christ."

In dealing with the Corinthians

Paul believed that to exercise this right of receiving support from those he served

would be detrimental to the gospel.

It would "hinder the gospel of Christ."

How would it “hinder the gospel of Christ”?

In v. 18, he says that in preaching the gospel,

he wanted to offer it free of charge--

In offering the "free" gospel "free of charge"

his own ministry becomes a living paradigm, a living picture,

of the gospel itself.<sup>1</sup>

To receive patronage from the Corinthians

might confuse them about what the gospel of Christ is about.

God's saving work in Jesus Christ isn't something you can purchase--

and this gospel isn't of the same category as the message of the traveling Sophists

who liked to parade their powerful and prideful rhetorical before the people,

and who then grew wealthy from their efforts.

The gospel of Christ is something completely different,

and Paul wanted the Corinthians to realize that,

even through the means that it came to them--

free of charge,

coming from a man who refused to engage in the rhetorical flourishes

that drew attention to himself,

and which demanded payment for his services,

but who, instead, worked with his own hands to support himself.

Paul came to Corinth preaching Christ crucified--

a message of God's power found in human weakness,

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<sup>1</sup>So Fee.

and a message that can only be received  
by those who confess their powerlessness,  
and receive it as a gracious gift.

Paul refused patronage and pay for the sake of the gospel--  
he was pleased to give up his rights and put up with anything  
rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. //

And do you see how this, too, is a demonstration of the gospel?

Can you see how Paul's own behavior imitates the behavior of Christ--

**"Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used for his own advantage,  
but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, a slave,  
being made in human likeness.**

**And being found in appearance as a man,**

**he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!"**

Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, gave up his rights for us—

He left the glory of his heavenly home to enter into this fallen world—

not as a prince in a grand palace,

but as a baby laid in an animal feeding trough,

ultimately leading to a cruel death on a cross.

He who knew no sin became sin for us

so that we might share his righteousness.

This is the gospel--

the self-giving love of God seen in the weakness of the cross of Christ.

This is the gospel which has gripped Paul the Apostle,  
and which now forms the pattern for his own life and ministry.

And Christ's example is to be the model for all Christians—

Paul had said it to the Philippians—

**“in humility value others above yourselves,  
not looking to your own interests  
but each of you to the interests of the others.**

**In your relationships with one another,  
have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:” (Phil. 2:3-5)**

For what did Jesus say?

**“Come, follow me.”**

**“Come, take your cross daily and follow me.” //**

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Paul saw it as his fundamental role as an apostle to make this gospel known—

both through his words and through his life.

For the gospel is not just something that we believe in our minds,

it is something that is lived out in our bodies.

Its truth must be embodied in real life.

That's what Paul is showing us in this passage—

In renouncing his rights, Paul is displaying the gospel of God.

That's why Paul says to the Philippians,

**“Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—  
put it into practice.” /**

The gospel results in a new way of life.

You see, it's critical that we understand the gospel to be both transactional  
and transformational.

The gospel is transactional in that it reveals to us how we are to be saved.

We can think of the gospel as a transaction—

God gives us his Son—he dies for our sin in our place.

Jesus acts as our substitute—taking the penalty we deserve upon himself,  
and through our faith in Christ we are forgiven.

The gospel is about how we gain entrance into God's heaven.

But gospel is more than that—much more.

It is also transformational.

It is not just about how we get saved,  
but also about how we are to live.

It not only qualifies us to enter heaven,  
it also makes us fit to live there.

Jesus is not only our substitute,  
doing for us what we could never do for ourselves;  
he is also our representative, going before us  
and calling us to follow him in a new way of life.

The goal of the gospel is nothing less than the restoration of our humanity,  
conforming us to the very image of Christ,

who is the image of God in the world that we were created to be in the beginning.

The first Christians were first called "the Way"

for they entered into a new way of life—the way of Jesus Christ—  
for in the gospel we see a divine pattern, a paradigm, of a truly human life—  
a life of radical love.

A self-giving love that led Jesus to a Roman cross.

To be conformed to the image of Christ

is to live a cruciform life—a life shaped by a cross.

No longer are we to be self-seeking but self-giving,

following in the footsteps of our Lord

in humbly seeking the welfare of others.

Phil. 2:3 **"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.**

**Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,**

**not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.**

**In your relationships with one another,**

**have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:"**

That, Paul says, means being willing to give up your rights. /

"Giving up your rights"--I know that sounds so un-American.

We love our rights, we demand our rights, we fight for our rights.

But Jesus didn't—

and if we are to follow him, we must not either.

What did Jesus say?

Don't stand on your rights—

“If anyone slaps you on the right cheek,

turn to them the other cheek also.

And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt,

hand over your coat as well.

If anyone forces you to go one mile,

go with them two miles” (Mt. 5:39-41).

This sounds crazy, doesn't it?

Do you think that is even possible?

But giving up your rights is the key to the flourishing of any relationship.

What marriage can survive

when both partners are standing on their rights?

What friendship can grow

when both friends insist upon their rights?

What community can thrive when everyone is asserting their rights?/

And giving up your rights is necessary

if you are ever going to forgive.

When you are hurt, you have a right to seek justice,

to get even,

to do to them what they have done to you.

Forgiveness means giving up that right,

and absorbing the cost of forgiveness yourself.

I remember a number of years ago, an incident in our church

involving people no longer with us.

There was an enterprising business man

offering a lucrative investment opportunity to some in our church.

And couple of older men took him up on the offer,

and invested some of their retirement funds.

As it turned out, this scheme went bust, and the folks lost all their money.

More than that, what this man had done was illegal,

and he was convicted of a federal crime and sentenced to prison.

The man was broken by what he had done,

and the night before he was to go to prison

we gathered some people to pray for him,

and among those there were the two men who had been swindled.

They had been defrauded by an illegal scheme,

but they forgave that man,

absorbing the financial loss they had incurred,

and they prayed for him that the Lord would sustain him and his family

while he was in prison.

I remember that as shining example of gospel living.

Absorbing the cost of forgiveness—

isn't that what God himself has done for us in the cross of Christ? /

Giving up your rights is necessary

if you are ever going to forgive.

And giving up your rights is necessary

if you are ever going to love.

Love doesn't demand what is your due,

it isn't ruled by an attitude of entitlement and privilege.  
Instead, it gives instead of takes,  
it refuses to use its rights and privilege for selfish gain,  
but love relinquishes those rights and privileges for the benefit of others.

That's a challenge, isn't it.

There's a lot of talk about privilege these days.

I know I've got lots of privileges—

I have the privilege of living in this country—

the most prosperous in the world.

I have the privilege of being raised in a loving home,

with two college-educated parents.

I have the privilege of being well educated,

and being a part of a wonderful church family.

And I have the privilege of being a native speaker of English

and a member of the majority culture,

which makes life a lot easier.

I have all sorts of privileges—

The question is, What will I do with them?

What about Jesus?

What did he do with his privilege?

I think of John 13—during his meal with his disciples

on the night before his crucifixion,

**“Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power,**

**and that he had come from God and was returning to God;**

**so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing,”**

and wrapped a towel around his waist,  
and taking the role of a slave, he washed his disciples' feet.

**“I have set you an example,”** he said,

**“that you should do as I have done for you”** (John 13:15).

This is what the gospel looks like in life.

Is that what it looks like in your life?

Is that what it looks like in your life at home?

or your life at work?

or your life in school?

What are ways that you can give up your rights?

“But how can that be?” you may ask.

“If I don't stand on my rights, then I'll get run over.

People will take advantage of me.”

Yea, that's probably true.

What can I say?

You might even get crucified.

But this is how the gospel works—

this is how it transforms ugly self-centered sinners

into beautiful reflections of God himself.

May we live that cruciform life.

May the Lord transform us into the glorious image of Christ,  
by the power of the gospel at work among us.

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### Prayer

Phil. 3:10 --“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection  
and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,  
and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

4:30—“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God,  
with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander,  
along with every form of malice.

32 Be kind and compassionate to one another,  
forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

5:1 Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children

2 and live a life of love,

just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us

as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

[Communion Service--

As we come to this table this morning

we come to recognize the way of Jesus Christ--

the one who was equal with God

did not regard equality with God

a thing to be used to his own advantage

but emptied himself--

he gave up his rights to glory

for the shame of becoming like one of us

dying on a Roman cross.

This is what the gospel is all about--

God's love for sinners like you and me--

rescuing us from our sin.

There is great power in this gospel of the cross--

has it gripped you?

There is really only one way to tell--

has it transformed your heart

so that you are able to give up your rights

for the sake of others.

Paul lived a cruciform life--

a life shaped by the cross of Christ--

And Paul says, imitate me as I imitate Christ.

Let's come to this table this morning

to be shaped by it--

receiving the love offered here,

and opening ourselves up to its transforming power.

Words of institution—

This table is for those who have accepted the call to Jesus  
when he says, “Come follow me.”

And like baptism,

it is a public and visible expression of that personal response,  
that’s why this act is reserved for those who have been baptized  
and have had their private faith affirmed by the church.

If that’s not true of you, take this time to reflect on that call of Jesus—  
be challenged by the way he gave up his rights for you—  
and perhaps, even today,  
you will respond to his love and grace in faith.

We will distribute the trays around the sanctuary,

and as we sing, come to any table and take one of the double cups  
and return to your seat and we will eat and drink together.

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**"The Church in the World:  
Studies in 1 Corinthians" No. 9  
June 6, 2021**

## **"Rights and Love"**

1 Cor. 9:1-18

In addressing the Corinthians' question about whether to eat meat sacrificed to idols in the pagan temple, Paul takes a digression, using his own life as an example. The gospel calls us to a life of love, which means giving up our rights for the sake of others.

### **I. Paul affirms the truth (9:1-14)—**

**He establishes his right  
to receive financial support.**

### **II. Paul acts in grace (9:12b, 15-18)—**

**He relinquishes his rights  
for the sake of the gospel.**

*The transformational power and purpose  
of the gospel—  
to redeem our humanity,  
that we might live a cruciform life.*

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**Sermon Response:**

**"Service and Rights**

1 Cor. 9:1-18

- Read 1 Cor. 9:4-14. Compare this with 1 Tim. 5:17,18. What does this say about a church's responsibility toward its pastors? Why did Paul refuse to take support from the Corinthians?
- Think of all the disputes that center on the exercise of one's "rights." Are you involved in any such disputes at the moment? How does Paul's example affect your thinking on how you ought to respond?
- The gospel calls us to a "cruciform life." What does that expression mean?
- Why can there be no forgiveness if people aren't willing to give up their rights?
- What examples have you seen of people giving up their rights?