

# My Rights!

## I Corinthians 9:1-27

As Americans, we care about our rights, our freedoms. We have fought wars to win and defend our rights. We vote for leaders who will protect our rights. We are the land of the free.

Most of us have never experienced the horror of oppressive government control. None of us should ever want to have that experience. It is good to cherish the rights we enjoy.

But as followers of Jesus Christ, there is more to living than exercising our God-given rights. And while we don't want our rights taken from us, we must be willing to lay them aside for the sake of love.

In I Corinthians 8, Paul argued that New Testament Christians had the right to eat all sorts of meats, even those that had been sacrificed to idols in pagan worship.

But he also argued that just because you have this right does not mean that you should always make use of that right.

**1 Corinthians 8:9** <sup>9</sup> But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

**1 Corinthians 8:13** <sup>13</sup> Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Eating meats offered to idols is not an issue for us today.

But there are plenty of other rights that we have that do matter to us.

Consider our rights as Americans:

We have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

We have a right to free speech.

We have a right to bear arms.

We have a right to private property.

We have a right to privacy.

We have the right to be considered innocent until proven guilty.

We have the right to equal protection under the law.

We have a right to worship as we want.

We have the right to vote for our gov't leaders.

As Christians we also have specific rights:

Jesus Christ died on the cross to make his people free and even to give us rights and privileges.

Paul will adamantly defend these freedoms.

**Galatians 2:4-5** <sup>4</sup> Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in- who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery- <sup>5</sup> to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

**Galatians 5:1** For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

What are those freedoms for which Jesus died?

Our Confession of Faith lays them out for us.

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WCF 20.1 The liberty which Christ has purchased for believers under the Gospel, consists  
in their  
    freedom from the guilt of sin,  
    the condemning wrath of God,  
    the curse of the moral law;(1)  
and,  
    in their  
        being delivered from  
            this present evil world,  
            bondage to Satan  
            and dominion of sin;(2)  
    from  
        the evil of afflictions,  
        the sting of death,  
        the victory of the grave,  
        and everlasting damnation;(3)  
as also,  
    in their  
        free access to God,(4)  
        and their yielding obedience unto Him,  
        not out of slavish fear,  
        but a child-like love and willing mind.(5)

All which were common also to believers under the law;(6)  
but, under the new testament,  
    the liberty of Christians is further enlarged  
        in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law,  
            to which the Jewish Church was subjected,(7)  
    and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace,(8)  
    and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God,  
        than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.(9)

It was in particular the freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law that the early Church struggled to understand and maintain.

The Reformation was in large part a recovery of the freedoms that are given to us in the Gospel. Sound preaching in many ways is simply the articulation of the freedoms that are yours in Christ.

But, while we must constantly uphold and defend our freedoms and rights, we also must be very careful that we do not use them to continue pursuing a life of selfish indulgence.

It is easy use our freedoms and rights as a cover to hide our unwillingness to serve, especially to serve our brothers and sisters in Christ.

**Galatians 5:13-14** <sup>13</sup> For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. <sup>14</sup> For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

**1 Peter 2:16** <sup>16</sup> Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

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It is with this subtle but destructive attitude that Paul confronts in I Corinthians 9.

Everyone was demanding their rights.  
Not many were caring for one another.

Paul will defend his rights as an apostle. And then he will show how he did not exercise those rights.

It was in the setting aside of his rights that Paul emulated his Lord and Savior.  
Jesus gave up many of the “rights and privileges” of heaven to come to the earth and endure great hardship and suffering. Why? For the sake of Gospel love. He came to the earth to bring people out of the darkness of their love of self.

Paul was a recipient of that love. Paul had received grace from Jesus. And so, now Paul wants to emulate in his life the love that Christ extended to him.

Paul wants to set aside his rights, in order to love others with the same Gospel that was given to him.

And it is his attitude of NOT demanding his rights, that he wants to see embraced by the Corinthians.

Read I Corinthians 9:1-27

Am I not free?  
Of course I am!  
Am I not an apostle?  
Absolutely!  
Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?  
I most certainly have!  
Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?  
You truly are my workmanship!

In what way is Paul here free?

- 1. as a Christian 2. as a Roman citizen
- He is not a slave to anyone. He is a Roman citizen.
- Slaves may not have rights, but Paul has rights!

In addition to having rights as a citizen (or as a Christian), Paul also has apostolic rights.  
Apostles, because of their calling given by God, had certain rights.  
Paul is a true apostle and so has the rights associated with Apostleship.

<sup>2</sup> 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.  
<sup>3</sup> This is my defense to those who would examine me.

Some may doubt the validity of Paul’s apostleship, but not the Corinthians. They exist as a Church because of Paul’s ministry to them.

The Corinthian Church confirms to everyone that Paul is a true apostle.

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Now that Paul has established that his is not a slave and that he is an apostle, he is going to make clear what exactly his rights are. There are three of them.

4 Do we not have the right to eat and drink?  
5 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?

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

Apostles have a right to eat and drink.

Apostles have a right to take along a believing wife.

Apostles have a right to be paid for their work in preaching the gospel.

It is this third right that is the focus of Paul's point. He has a right to be paid!

And just to make sure everyone understands, Paul is going to defend his right to be paid!

7 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?

General wisdom in the world makes clear that if someone works, then from that work he or she has the right to be paid.

- Soldiers ought to be paid.
- Farmers get paid from their labors.
- Shepherds receive wages for their work.

If you work hard, then you ought to be paid for your work.

But general wisdom is not enough for Paul. He wants to establish the certainty of rights from the OT Law.

8 Do I say these things on human authority?  
Does not the Law say the same?  
9 For it is written in the Law of Moses,  
"You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain."

**Deuteronomy 25:4** <sup>4</sup> "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain."

Paul's use of the Law here is fascinating.

1. He considers the laws of Deuteronomy as valid and binding.
2. He is able to broadly apply the principle of the law.

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Is it for oxen that God is concerned?

What a fascinating question.

On face value, I would say that it is absolutely for oxen that God is concerned.

The text is clear. Do not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.

If I were going to broadly apply the principle, I would have thought of other animals.

Do not forget to feed the horse after he has taken you on a long journey.

Do not forget to feed the dog after he has guarded the chickens all night.

There is no doubt that the law has some meaning for those situations. But Paul is asking a different question. He is asking why it is that God gave this law in the first place.

And the answer to that question is that he wants to teach people how to treat other people, by making use of the animal kingdom.

In giving the law about oxen, God is actually trying to teach a principle that should govern the behavior of his children towards one another.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

Paul says that the law about oxen was written for our sake, for the sake of people. Not because the law is an ancient form of PETA. (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals)

Treating animals correctly has some value.

But God is mostly concerned with how people treat people.

So, Paul goes right to human applications of the law. One might wonder why God did not do this in the first place.

If a plowman plows the field, or if the thresher threshes the field, they expect to receive a portion of the crop. Otherwise they would not do the work.

Now Paul gets to his point:

<sup>11</sup> If we have sown spiritual things among you,  
is it too much if we reap material things from you?  
<sup>12</sup> If others share this rightful claim on you,  
do not we even more?

The apostle who performs a spiritual service, has a right to receive material benefits.

And, it was clear that other apostles had made use of their rights and had collected wages from the Corinthians.

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Paul has taken a full 12 verses to get to the point of telling the Corinthians that he has a right to their money. But why do this?

Because he wants to begin collecting?  
Hardly.

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.

There are things that are more important to Paul than demanding his rights.

One is the thought of hindering someone from believing the gospel.

If when you take the gospel to unbelievers, you immediately demand that you get paid, you will likely turn some people away, thinking that you are simply out to make money. Paul does not want this to keep anyone from hearing and receiving the gospel.

13     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?  
14     In the same way,  
       the Lord commanded  
          that those who proclaim the gospel  
          should get their living by the gospel.

We thought that Paul was finished establishing his right to receive pay for his work as an apostle, and then he takes two more verses to make the same point again. "The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel."

He does seem to make a distinction here between initial evangelistic ministry and ongoing pastoral ministry. In the example of taking the gospel to new places, it is possible to hinder someone from believing. But the one who serves at the temple is serving those who are already believers. And he is doing it in an ongoing fashion. The OT priests received a share of the temple sacrifices as their right. To withdraw that share from them would be a form of stealing from them.

Pastors have a right to be paid by their congregations.  
Apostles certainly have a right to be supported by those to whom they ministered.

But...

15     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.

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But what?

But Paul has freely chosen to NOT make use of his right to be supported by the Corinthians.

As a side note, it is important to recognize that Paul did receive help from churches at other times and places.

**Philippians 4:14-16** <sup>14</sup> Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. <sup>15</sup> And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. <sup>16</sup> Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.

So, let us not conclude that providing for yourself was the norm in every situation even for Paul. And let us not think that it is somehow less spiritual to receive support for being a minister. As usual, we need balance. And we need to really think clearly about what is the error that Paul is correcting in the Corinthians.

Paul is not making the case that true ministers who are really committed will never receive support. So, what is Paul's motivation for not receiving payment from the Corinthians?

Paul makes clear that in his writing about support, he is not trying to persuade them to support him.

For some reason, Paul believes that to receive support from the Corinthians, would rob him of his ground for boasting.

<sup>16</sup> 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!

Paul does not believe that his preaching the gospel is something that he chose to do. And, if you remember his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, it makes sense how he thought this way. Jesus did not give Paul a gradual love for the lost. He simply showed up and declared himself to be Paul's true Master. And then he told Paul the work that he had for him. For Paul to do anything other than preach the gospel would have been rebellion to Jesus.

But, Jesus did not tell Paul that he had to preach the gospel free of charge. On this point, Paul did have a choice. He could be paid for his services. Or he could choose to make his own living while he was preaching.

It is also important to see that Paul reveals his inner motivations. Motivation matters. Why you do what you do matters to God. It is important that you do what is right. But it also matters why you do what you do.

<sup>17</sup> For if I do this of my own will,  
I have a reward,  
but  
not of my own will,  
I am still entrusted with a stewardship.

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A steward was often a slave who was entrusted with the estate of his master. For Paul, preaching the gospel was a matter of duty and obligation. Of course, he preached the gospel willingly. But, even if he did not do it willingly, he would still be doing it. Because his master required it of him.

But, Paul preached willingly, as a matter of worship and obedience to God.

Paul then speaks of a reward. He expects to receive a reward for his preaching the gospel. The question is whether this reward comes to him because he has preached the gospel willingly, or because he has preached it free of charge.

Verse 18 seems to point to the fact that Paul preached “free of charge.”

<sup>18</sup>     What then is my reward?  
          That in my preaching  
                I may present the gospel free of charge,  
                          so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

Paul’s believes that his not making use of his “right” to receive payment for his preaching will result in his receiving a specific reward.

How exactly Paul came to this conclusion is not stated.

A doctor has a right to receive payment for his or her services. But if that doctor, out of an inner motivation of love, chooses to render services free of charge, he or she may do so.

But it is unclear exactly how they might do this because they expect some reward.

That seems to be what Paul is saying. He is preaching, free of charge. And because he is doing this, he is looking for a reward.

Or possibly, Paul considers his preaching free of charge his reward.

What is my reward?

That as I fulfil my duty in preaching, I am blessed with doing it “free of charge.”

One might ask how this could be a reward.

It seems more like a sacrifice.

But the Gospel does that. It turns our way of thinking upside down.

Paul considers it a privilege, not a right, to be able to make a personal sacrifice, for the benefit of another person, and for the possibility of another person coming to know Jesus Christ.

If this is what Paul is saying, this type of reward is called an “intrinsic reward.”

There are two types of rewards: intrinsic and extrinsic.

Extrinsic rewards are not connected to service performed.



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If I offer to you \$100 if you will read the book of John this week, that is an extrinsic reward. You may have no interest in getting any spiritual truth out of the book of John, but because you can spend the \$100 on something you want, you will read John. The reward is not connected to the action performed.

But, if you read the book of John this week because you hope to know better the spiritual truths contained in the book, then your reward is intrinsic. It is connected to, or found within, the action that you performed.

The Bible uses both types of motivation. But intrinsic reward is certainly on a higher level. The more we can be intrinsically motivated, the better.

I believe Paul is making a case that he does what he does because his actions procure for him true blessing.

The doctor who offers his services free of charge ideally does so out of love. That is his reward.

And Paul's deepest motivation is twofold.

All that he does is motivated by a true love and affection for Jesus Christ.

And all that he does is motivated by a desire to emulate Christ's love for the Church.

Paul does not expect that the Corinthians will be able to emulate him specifically. They are not apostles. But Paul does want the Corinthians to emulate his willingness to give up his rights for the higher objective of loving Christ and loving the Church.

I know that the concept of love has been twisted and distorted in our day. I know that people reject the biblical definition of love. Paul is not advocating the world's distortion of love. But neither is he abandoning love. Christ came to this world, setting aside his right to the glories of heaven, in order to save his people from their sin.

His reward was nothing less than the very ones he sacrificed to redeem.

Jesus is the fullest expression of love.

Jesus defines love.

And Paul wants his own life to in some way emulate that same love.

Now, we are beginning to understand how the demanding of rights is contrary to the spirit of Christ.

Rights, God-given rights, are important and to be greatly valued.

But they are not everything when it comes to true godliness.

Setting aside your rights for the sake of love – that captures the heart of the gospel.

<sup>19</sup> For though I am free from all,  
I have made myself a servant to all,  
that I might win more of them.

Paul has willingly chose to make himself a servant to the Corinthians.

He is not a doormat, to be trampled on by others.

Paul has authority as an apostle.

But he doesn't use that authority to demand that others serve him.

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Instead, he willingly sets aside his rights, to serve others.  
And his hope in serving others is that they might be won to Jesus Christ.

Not just that they could have notches in their belt – as if to say – “look how many people I have won to Christ.” But rather to have the joy of seeing others come to embrace the same attitude that has so captivated Paul.

20           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.  
21           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.  
22           To the weak I became weak,  
                  that I might win the weak.  
          I have become all things to all people,  
                  that by all means I might save some.  
23           I do it all for the sake of the gospel,  
                  that I may share with them in its blessings.

That I may win... (4 X's)  
... save some (not all will embrace Christ's heart)  
That I may share with them in its blessings.

But for those who do embrace Christ's attitude of setting aside rights to serve, Paul will enjoy the blessing of living to serve together with them.

They will have a common goal, a common purpose.  
As fellow members of the body of Christ, they will be united in the common objective of “becoming like Christ.”

And, if they have a clear objective, they will be fervent in striving for that objective.

24           Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete,  
                  but  
          only one receives the prize?  
                  So run that you may obtain it.  
25           Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.  
                  They do it to receive a perishable wreath,  
                  but  
          we an imperishable.

Paul uses an illustration that would have been obvious to the Corinthians. Just a few miles outside of the city of Corinth, every other year, there were competitions held: the Isthmus Games. These were very much like the Olympic games. It is possible that Paul even watched some of these competitions.

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And, when an athlete won, they received a crown. Well, it was more of a wreath than a crown. In a few days the leaves would have been withered and falling off. But for that one moment they were on top of the world.

Paul uses this illustration because no one forces the athlete to make the sacrifices that he makes. He willingly accepts these sacrifices because he wants the perishable wreath. How much more ought the Christian set aside rights and take opportunities to serve and to love, knowing that his crown will be imperishable. It will never wither. Its glory will not fade.

For the Christian, the greatest reward is to be like Christ.  
This is the goal for which the Holy Spirit indwells you.

To believe in Christ is the beginning. To believe in Christ is to set you on a path to becoming like Christ. The Christian life is a striving towards the goal of being like Christ. Being like Christ is the reason why Christ took hold of you. Being like Christ must be what we are striving after.

As Christians, you must know your purpose, or you will not be very vigorous in seeking to attain it. Our calling is to press on vigorously until we have reached the goal.

Do you have Christ-likeness as your goal?  
Do you see Christ-likeness as your greatest reward?  
Do you look for opportunities for setting aside your rights?  
Do love and service mean as much to you as your rights?

Paul ends with his own testimony.

26                So I do not run aimlessly;  
                      I do not box as one beating the air.  
27                But  
                      I discipline my body and keep it under control,  
                              lest after preaching to others  
                                      I myself should be disqualified.

While Paul wants to focus primarily on the reward of becoming like Christ, he also understands that to reject the goal of Christlike service will result in disqualification from the race.

Becoming Christlike is not an option for Paul. We are all at different places in the race. Some are further along than others. But there is no other goal than Christ-likeness.

As a Christian, you have rights, glorious rights. But we must be careful to not make our rights into idols. In idolatry, one tries to manipulate the gods into serving them. If all we care about is defending our rights, we are really only using our rights as a means to serve ourselves.

The Apostle Peter says it rather well.

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**1 Peter 2:16** <sup>16</sup> Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

As an American, I love and cherish the rights that others have fought to give to me.

As a Christian, I love and cherish even more the rights that Jesus has died to give to me.

And as a Christian striving to be like Christ, I look for opportunities to set aside those rights to serve others.

Amen.