

1 Corinthians 9:1-18 Better Than My Rights Falls Ch. AM 4/21/2024

People today, just like the people in Corinth, like to assert their rights. In fact, the constitution of our country says that our liberty to choose what to do is an inalienable right. The Declaration of Independence gives three examples of inalienable rights – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

We have other rights. The right to...

To act in our own self-defense

To own private property, and to be secure in our homes.

To work and to enjoy the fruits of our labor.

To move freely within the county or even to move to another country.

To worship or to refrain from worshipping.

These rights cannot be taken away. Our rights are beyond the reach of government. The Senators cannot pass a law to take away our rights. No one can remove our rights. The rights are given to us at birth, and retained throughout our life.

These rights we sometimes call privileges or entitlements, that is, things that are owed to us.

This freedom and liberty goes too far. Because we have a declaration of independence as a nation, we seem to think that we have independence as personal individuals. That is going too far.

A more philosophical term is autonomy. Auto is self. And nomos is law. So we each determine for ourselves what rules we adopt and follow. We each decide what is right and wrong for ourselves. Paul hit this issue head on and said how wrong it is!

Do we have rights? Sure. But there is something better. There is something better than my rights. There is something higher than our rights. There is something more valuable than our rights.

Christ has given me what is better than my rights: a Christ-like heart that would willingly surrender my rights for others!

1. The rights are truly mine. (v.1-7)

Paul's rights were real.

In chapter 9, Paul was illustrating from his own life the principle that he laid down previously in chapter 8. The bold Corinthians had the right to eat of the meat, but what was better was to give up their right to eat of that meat, in order to bless another person.

Do preachers practice what they preach? Paul did. Paul proved that he prioritized acting in love over his pleading for his rights, based on his own knowledge. Paul was living out what Paul was urging them to live out.

In verse 1, Paul asked rhetorical questions. Am I not free? This answers the first objection – how can we considered free if we give up that freedom for the

sake of another Christian? Paul was asking “*Am I not free?*” to show that Paul practiced the higher principle of love, and yet retained his freedom. Paul still was free – he still had the power to utilize his freedom for his own benefit, but He decided instead to give up his freedom willingly. His freedom was real.

Next Paul asked “am I not an apostle?” If anyone could have claimed his own authority and rights, it would be an apostle. Since Paul the apostle was the person with the most authority and most rights, and yet he was willing to forgo his rights, how much more should the Corinthians be willing pass up their rights.

In verses 3,4,5, Paul kept defending the truth of his rights by asking more questions – could an apostle get reimbursed for his food expenses, could an apostle take his wife along on ministry travels, could an apostle avoid working another job and be supported only by the church’s funds?

So, what prerogatives belonged to Paul, that he was not collecting? The right to a paycheck! As Paul wrote in verses 6-7, the paycheck was a universally recognized principle in every realm of human endeavor – a soldier gets paid for fighting for his country, a farmer who plants a vineyard gets paid by being able to eat some of the fruit, and a shepherd gets paid by being able to enjoy some milk and milk products from his flocks and herds. Since no one objects to these paychecks, then no one should object to paying the apostle.

2. Spiritual rights operate the same way as other rights. (v.8-14)

Here Paul showed that rights in the spiritual realm operate the same as rights in other areas. In verse 8, when Paul wrote the Law, he was talking about God’s Books of the law = the Pentateuch, the Books of Moses Gen/Ex/Lev/Num/Deut. At the start of verse 9, Paul quoted from Moses – the verse about NOT MUZZLING the ox while treading grain. God cares about oxen, but the law must have had a more important application, beyond the oxen. Oxen being driven around and around on the threshing floor should not be cruelly restrained from eating some of the food that his own labor is making available....and since that is true for oxen, it is also the same with humans, such as apostles. No labor should be in drudgery without any incentive. Neither an ox, nor a human being was reduced to being a mechanical instrument serving only others, without anything to gain for himself. People need incentives, because life is more than sheer toil. The law about oxen reveals God’s will for His world, showing something is provided for the animals working for us, and something is provided for the humans working for us. The ox deserved his share of the grain that resulted from that ox treading grain, and Paul deserved his share in the rights of a man proclaiming the gospel.

In verse 11 – since Paul performed a spiritual service for Corinth, was it too much for him to ask to be materially supported? Was it too much to expect? Since an animal sows, an animal reaps. Since the apostle sows, the apostle reaps. Since Moses taught that sowing and reaping applied to grain, then sowing and reaping

applied also to spiritual sowing of the gospel seed. The one who was working also should receive a return from the work. Proverbs 27:18, “*Whoever tends a fig tree will eat its fruit, and he who guards his master will be honored.*”

In verse 12, others – Paul showed that when the processed grain was delivered to them, they would expect to have to pay for it, so similarly when the gospel seed was delivered to them, shouldn’t they expect to have to pay for it?

Second half of verse 12, the reason that Paul had been focused on this point, was in order to show that Paul voluntarily relinquished his right to be paid for preaching the gospel to them. Paul renounced his right for support from them. Why? Because there was something better: investing in the advance of the gospel.

In verse 13 – Paul wrote a familiar phrase “DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT”. Just like the previous times (in chapter 6), that Paul used this phrase, so here again the thing that they knew was clear. This time it was the fact that Old Testament priests could eat the meat that was offered, as shown in the book of Leviticus chapters 6 and 7, whenever the people brought the meat to the Old Testament temple, that meat could be eaten by the priests. Paul showed the connection in 14 – “*in the same way...*” meaning that the application was direct. In other words, those who proclaimed the gospel got their living by the gospel. Paul was teaching the same truth as Jesus had taught when Jesus said “...*the laborer deserves his food...*” Matthew 10:10. Over in Luke 10:7, we read that Jesus said, “...*the laborer deserves his wages...*” The church provides preachers with resources so that they are able to serve the church freely, without a need for another job too. Again, Paul’s whole point - that Paul deserves the wages, but Paul was turning them down, because of something better!

3. To forfeit my rights for a higher cause, when needed, is better than to claim my rights for my enjoyment. (v.15-18)

In verse 15 – Paul repeated his point by writing, “...*I have made no use of any of these rights...*” Paul had not received their money, and he was not asking for their money now. Quite the opposite. Paul wanted something better. Paul next wrote that he would rather die than receive what is worse. He wanted something better. The intensity of language showed Paul’s passion about this subject. Paul passionately wanted to reserve the right to boast, with a legitimate ground to do so. Boast? Really? Doesn’t that seem a bit out of character for Paul? Let’s not misunderstand him here. Let’s not forget that Paul’s theme, ever since chapter 1 of 1 Corinthians, was the theme revolving around glorying in the cross. The clear contrast is between human boasting and glorying in the Lord. Chapter 1:31, “...*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.*” And chapter 2:2, “*I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.*” For Paul, boasting was the same as glorying in Christ and Christ crucified. Paul was passionate about not letting anyone deprive Paul of the ground for boasting and His right to

proclaim the gospel. Paul would rather have died than to lose the statement of Jesus, freely you have received, freely give, from Matthew 10:8. Paul had a ground for glorying in Jesus. Don't threaten to change that, or you threaten to change the very nature of who Paul was. In offering the free gospel free of charge, Paul's own ministry became a living demonstration of the gospel itself. It would actually be false if a pastor would turn to this chapter in order to advocate for his own salary, because Paul showed here that the best illustration would be if the pastor worked for free. Paul's ground for boasting or reason for glorying in Christ was the cross of Christ! Christ's cross was the picture of self-giving and self-sacrificing, accomplished by self-emptying. This was such a fundamental ethical core, that Paul was willing to die rather than lose this basis. To Paul, this self-sacrificing was better than self-advocacy. The gospel was better than his rights. Christ was better than his rights. Having Christ was better than having his rights. v. 16 – *“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 was under a compulsion to give out the gospel. Paul was set apart for this task before his birth. Galatians 1:15, God *“...set me apart before I was born, and...called me by His grace.”* By the will of God and by the agency of God, Paul received a compulsion that was placed upon him to preach the gospel. If Paul were to try to escape the constraints and commission of this calling, it would cause agony.

In verse 17 – If Paul set out to preach by volunteering, or entirely by his own personal choice, that would be an entirely different concept. It would then be for some personal reward for Paul. Self-motivation leads to a logical benefit for self. This motivation would have remained in the realm of reward. It would have been legitimate to ask - what was in it for Paul, if Paul was volunteering to do this of his own will only? But Paul operated in a different realm altogether. It was not about a reward. It was not about pay or wages. It was not about Paul at all. Rather, it was about a task entrusted to him by God. Paul was revealing to us a sort of management chain that we could not know about without Paul sharing this information. Paul showed us that Paul was the recipient of a mantle laid upon his shoulders. God Himself had given Paul a stewardship. Paul had no choice. Paul would either be a good or a bad steward of that stewardship from God. Paul could not simply opt out of it. Paul must perform the task of preaching. Paul barely wants to think about the ramifications if Paul fails to perform the task of preaching. All Paul knows is that it would not be good. Instead of thinking about that, Paul presents to us the beautiful pull on him to perform the God-appointed task of preaching as freely giving out what Paul had freely received. God gave him a free gift, and so Paul is giving it away. Pressure does not apply. Paul is not scared of failure. Paul does not focus on the woe and agony of not giving out the gospel.

Rather, Paul shows what is better than wages. Paul shows that Paul is privileged to be in a realm where one who gives, receives. It is in giving that the apostle receives. It is in preaching the gospel that the apostle receives fruit from the crop and the enjoyment of his share of the crop. It is not an external reward. It is the ability to be stamped with Paul's personal identification with the cross of Christ. Paul is on Christ's team! Paul is an apostle! Paul has a part in the Kingdom! Why would Paul want to do anything to risk messing that up? Boasting or glorying is a major theme in 1 Corinthians, because by it the church understands the gospel. Paul's boast here is not that he has preached, but rather that he has not made use of the rights that are his from preaching. Paul did not take a salary, and that is Paul's boast. We see this clearly in verse 18...

v. 18 – *“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 has been willing to do what the bold Christians in Corinth were not willing to do. Paul was willing to forego a right of his, as Paul now pleads with the bold Christians to do. Forego their rights. Paul has not made use of his right. Paul has endured everything. Paul calls not the tender but the bold to do this. The tender have no rights to surrender. To tell the tender to give up their rights is like telling a slave to surrender their freedom. They don't have any freedom. They think no one is allowed to eat. But the bold think that they have a right to eat. Paul says you are correct, you have a right to eat. Now, come with me and decline your rights. Decline your rights for Christ's sake. Decline your rights to follow Christ fully. Decline your rights for the benefit of the tender people. Decline your rights for the beautiful outcome of unity in the church.

Decline your rights, so that you can boast or glory in the cross of Christ. You sacrificed. You gave up something. Your walk with Christ cost you something! You invested in the unity of the church by paying for it with your own personal cost. You are just a little bit closer to understanding what Christ did on the cross. Christ gave up something. Christ sacrificed something. Christ invested in the unity of the church by paying for it with personal cost.

Give up your right to eat meat offered to idols. Stop eating. Do it for the sake of the Christian community. Do it for the sake of the common good. If you use your right to eat meat, it will destroy the tender brother or tender sister. Resist destroying another person. Care about him or her more than you care about your rights.

Give up your right to be correct on the gray area, for the benefit of the body of believers here.

Conclusion: We need to ask ourselves a searching question.

Is the gospel of Christ as important to us as it was to Paul? Are we giving anything up for the sake of the gospel?

Glorying in the cross, or boasting about our Great God, who died and rose again to give us everything for free, is what we are all about.

Anything that we could possibly have the right on earth to enjoy is less important than advancing the cause of the kingdom.

Christ has done such a work in our hearts that we are willing to follow Christ and give up anything for Him.

We give up things for Christ, for the gospel cause.

The bold and well-taught Corinthian Christians were to remain willing to give up their right to eat meat, if it would bring more unity with the tender brother or sister who was not sure about eating meat.

The modern Christian today has a heart given to you from Christ such that you remain willing to give up any of your rights for something better. Christ is better. The gospel cause is better. Unity in the church is better.

When disputes break out, we make our point, and then we cave on that point for the sake of the unity between us.

When we forego rightful enjoyments, because unity is more important, the gospel advances.

By the sacrifice of Christ, the gospel advances.

By the sacrifice of my desires, the gospel advances.

Philippians 3:10-11, Paul wrote, "I want to know Christ, and the power of His resurrection, that I may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

What if the means possible, is for us to give up our rights for something better? Would you become like Christ and do it?

Come die with me. Deny your own rights, and watch the gospel advance, and we all can glory in the cross of Christ.