

1 Corinthians 9:1-14 “God and the Ox: Our ‘Rights’ and the Gospel”  
Deuteronomy 24:19-25:4, 26:1-19  
Psalm 126

June 1, 2014

“You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.”

It sounds pretty straightforward.

When you are threshing your grain,  
make sure that the ox gets his fair share.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians,

“Is it for oxen that God is concerned?  
Does he not speak entirely for our sake?”

Some people get miffed at Paul –

“Of course God is concerned for oxen –  
even a sparrow cannot fall from its nest, but God is concerned!”

But God did not address the book of Deuteronomy to oxen or sparrows.

He addressed the book of Deuteronomy to *us*.

Paul’s not saying that you can mistreat animals!

Rather, he’s saying that Deuteronomy is articulating a principle *to man*.

That’s why I read the end of chapter 24.

God has been laying out basic principles of conduct.

How should you operate your business?

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt –  
so look out for the little guy.

How should you administer justice?

Punish the wicked, yes, but don’t use excessive cruelty.

And remember that all those who are involved in harvesting your crops –  
*even the ox* – deserves a share in the harvest.

God speaks *entirely* for our sake – so that we might treat all of creation (including the ox)  
in a just and wise manner.

Psalm 126 is one of my favorite harvest Psalms.

The Psalm speaks of “restoring our fortunes” –

which is a common phrase in the OT, meaning “return from exile.”

The first half of the Psalm speaks of the laughter and joy

that came when the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion.

But the second half of the Psalm pleads,

“Restore our fortunes, O LORD”

so that those who sow in tears may reap with shouts of joy.

Right now, we sow in tears.

Right now, we go out weeping.

The specter of death haunts your steps.  
I don't need to be a prophet to foretell that someone you love is going to die soon!  
Indeed, *everyone you love* is going to die relatively soon!

We are elect exiles of the dispersion.

We are sojourners – temporary workers – who labor here for a while.

My official title here at MCPC is “stated supply,”  
and so people sometimes ask if I see this as a permanent call.  
I always say, “No, this is only a temporary call.  
I can't imagine staying more than 30-40 years  
(I should probably start saying 25-30 years!)  
My only permanent call is that my calling in Christ.

And so we sow in hope – because the LORD has done great things for us  
in the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Father!

Sing Psalm 126

Read 1 Corinthians 9:1-18

### **Introduction: Food Offered to Idols and “My Rights” (chapter 8)**

We saw last time that when Paul deals with the question of “food offered to idols,”  
he is not just talking about ancient superstitions.

He is talking about questions of basic loyalties.

In Corinth, if your patron invited you to the celebration of his son's coming-of-age,  
the party would be held at a dining room connected with a pagan temple.

The feast would be “barely” religious – *maybe* there would be a pagan priest  
doing his little ritual at the beginning,

but if you arrived a few minutes late –  
you'd miss the worst parts.

The question for Paul is not just an abstract question of “was the food offered to idols?”

The question is “what does your participation in this meal mean?”

Not just to you, personally,

but to your *Christian* community –

as well as to your *former* pagan community!

I was once at such a meal.

My boss invited me to hang out with his friends.

It was clear from the start –

to join with them in their festivities

would be to deny Christ.

You may wonder – how was it so clear?

I don't need to tell you.

If you had been there, you would know!

Sometimes it's just that clear!

Paul concluded chapter 8 by pointing out that if you use your “rights”  
to destroy your weaker brother – the “brother for whom Christ died” –  
then you sin against Christ.

So, Paul, can you give us an example?

What would it mean to “give up” your rights?

### **1. Paul’s Apology: Consider My Rights as an Apostle (v1-7)**

*Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? <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.*

Paul appeals here to his apostleship –

to his unique status as a foundational witness to the Lord Jesus.

He acknowledges in verse 2 that there are some who do not recognize him as an apostle,  
but he insists that the Corinthians are the “seal of my apostleship” –  
the certificate – the “letter of standing” as it were.

We are sometimes so overawed by the apostles (as we should be!),  
that we forget that in the first century, people were not nearly so impressed!  
To the people in Corinth and Ephesus and Philippi,  
Paul was a traveling preacher who came with a fairly bizarre message  
about the resurrection of an obscure Jewish rabbi.

I mean, seriously, if some guy showed up today at church,  
saying that an obscure Israeli rabbi who died 20 years ago  
was in fact the long-awaited Messiah –  
you’d think he was nuts!

Paul understands that his apostolic identity will be contested by some.  
He realizes that mere assertion is not sufficient!  
But he appeals to the Corinthians as those who *know better*.

But he starts by asking, “Am I not free?” (v1)  
What does it mean to be free?

Paul used the same word in 7:21-22 to speak of how a slave can become free.  
He also used the same word in 7:39 to speak of how a widow  
is free to be married to whom she wishes

When a person is “free” that means that they are under no binding obligations.  
A married person is under binding obligations.  
In that respect, I am not free.  
Likewise, a slave is under binding obligations.

But Paul is not under binding obligations (except to the Lord Jesus).

Paul uses the same word “free” in verse 19 to assert that he is free from all (people).

In the Roman world there was form of obligation that may not be as apparent to us.  
Patronage.

The client *owes* his patron.

Paul's emphasizes his *freedom* precisely in his refusal  
to accept patronage from the Corinthians.

Think back to chapters 1-2.

"not many of you were wise according to worldly standards,  
not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth." (1:26)

As we pointed out then – and as becomes increasingly clear here –  
"not many" does not mean "none."

There were a *handful* of wise and powerful people in the church at Corinth.  
Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed with his entire household.  
Sosthenes, the next ruler of the synagogue, also appears to have become a believer.

But Paul does not want strings attached to his ministry.

He is an apostle.

He has seen Jesus.

Given how patronage worked in the Roman empire,  
if he accepts the patronage of Corinth,

he will become bound to one (or more) of their parties and factions.

And he wants no part of this!

So Paul uses himself as an example to the Corinthians  
of what it looks like to forego your rights for the sake of others.

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

In verses 3-5 he sets forth the basic outline of his defense –  
of his "apology."

An apology is not primarily an expression of sorrow.

An apology is a defense – an explanation of your conduct.

When someone bumps into you, they will say,  
"Excuse me, I didn't see you."

Or, "I'm sorry, I was in a hurry."

An apology is a good thing.

If it was an accident, then you should explain yourself!

1 Peter 3:15 says that we should always be ready with an apology – a defense –  
for the hope that is in us.

That's why we refer to "apologetics" as the "defense of the faith" –  
the explanation of why we believe the gospel.

Paul's apology starts with a list of questions:

*<sup>4</sup> Do we not have the right to eat and drink? <sup>5</sup> Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife,<sup>[a]</sup> as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? <sup>6</sup> Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? <sup>7</sup> 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 we not have the “right” – the “authority” –

This word “exousia” has been used in 8:9,  
to refer to “this right of yours” to eat food sacrificed to idols.

Paul has been urging the Corinthians to set aside their rights.

So now Paul uses himself as an example.

“Do we not have the *right* to eat and drink?”  
to get married?

And for that matter, is it only Barnabas and I who have *no right*  
to refrain from working for a living?

By use of these questions, Paul establishes the common pattern:

no one serves as a soldier at his own expense –  
the one who plants a vineyard eats some of its fruit –  
the shepherd gets some of the milk.

The laborer is worthy of his hire.

## **2. Paul’s Authority: Those Who Proclaim the Gospel Should Get Their Living from the Gospel (v8-14)**

But this is not merely a human principle.

In verses 8-10, Paul points to the authority of the Law of Moses:

*<sup>8</sup> Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? <sup>9</sup> For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? <sup>10</sup> Does he not certainly speak 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.*

When Deuteronomy 25:4 says that you shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,  
that means that *everyone* who participates in the harvest  
deserves a share of the harvest.

The plowman plows in the spring – but until the harvest comes, he has nothing to show for it!

And Paul applies this to the church in verses 11-12:

*<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?*

Notice how Paul uses the language of “rights.”

Paul says that there is an *obligation* on the part of the Corinthians toward him.

There are others who share this rightful claim –  
there are others who are making use of this right.

But Paul has not made use of this right:

*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.*

Paul does not explain exactly what the “obstacle” would be –  
but given that he *did* receive assistance from Philippi and elsewhere,  
it would appear that there were particular reasons for his refusing the right here.  
And his language of “rights” and obligations would point us  
in the direction of saying that Paul wants to be in the position of “spiritual patron”  
to the Corinthian church.

They owe him!  
They are indebted to him.

But Paul will not accept a cash payment for this debt!  
The only way that the Corinthians can pay their debt to Paul  
is by believing the gospel, and walking accordingly!

Paul goes a step further in verses 13-14, in describing the analogy between the OT temple  
and the NT church:

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

When Paul says that “the Lord commanded” he is referring to the teaching of Jesus.  
(We saw that in chapter 7, when he distinguished between “the Lord, not I”  
and “I, not the Lord”).

In Matthew 10:9-10 Jesus tells his disciples to go forth and preach –  
“Acquire no gold, nor silver nor copper for your belts, no bag for your journey,  
nor two tunics nor sandals nor a staff, for the laborer deserves his food.”

The basic principle that Moses, Jesus, and Paul all affirm  
is that there *should be* a transfer of spiritual and material goods  
between the people and their ministers.  
In the OT, spiritual blessings came through the priests at the temple –  
therefore God ordained an economic system  
that included this transfer of spiritual goods and material goods.  
In the book of Kings, some people bring their firstfruits *not* to the temple,

but to the prophet Elisha.  
It may appear to contradict Moses –  
but when Israel has fallen into idolatry,  
faithful Israelites realize that the place where they find spiritual benefits  
is *not* the shrines at Bethel and Dan –  
but with Elijah and Elisha – the prophets.

So how should we think about verses 13-14?  
When Paul says “in the same way” –  
does this mean that the OT rules about giving are still in place?  
Paul’s whole approach to the Law in 1 Corinthians  
would suggest that the answer is “not exactly.”  
Paul regularly appeals to OT *principles* without demanding OT *practices*.

And that is evidenced by the fact that he appeals to the Ox and the Temple,  
rather than to the tithe, the firstfruits, and the gleanings.  
Deuteronomy 25:4 is surrounded by references to these *practices* –  
but Paul chose to quote the passage that articulates the *principle!*

In Lev 25 and Dt 16, Israel was expected to bring the firstfruits at the feast of Passover,  
and again at the feast of Pentecost – together with a freewill offering,  
and then the tithe was to be brought at the Feast of Booths in the fall.  
Gleanings were to be left in the fields for the poor to gather after the harvest.

If you add up all the economic obligations of the faithful Israelite,  
this would add up to well over 10% of their annual income.

But Paul doesn’t seem remotely interested in trying to figure out a percentage.  
His point is simply that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

D. A. Carson says it well when he says,  
“The church does not pay its ministers;  
rather it provides them with resources so that they are able to serve freely.”  
(quoted in AT 693).  
The pastor gets his living by the gospel – but he is not an “employee” of the church.

The principle is that those who receive spiritual benefits from the preaching of the gospel  
should share their material benefits with those who preach.

OT economic principles are helpful –  
but we need to keep in mind that our economy is very different!  
(Even as the Roman economy was very different from ancient Israel).

The principle of tithing is useful –  
those who have property/income/wealth should probably consider giving at least 10%  
for the furtherance of the gospel.

If Abraham gave a tithe to Melchizedek,  
    how much more should we give to Jesus!  
But tithing in the OT is only used for landowners and plunder in battle –  
    so we need to be careful not to overstate the importance of tithing.

We once had a family who had very little income.  
    So they looked for ways to use their *time* in service to others in the church.  
    And that's an excellent example.

The principle of firstfruits is also useful for us to consider:  
    the *first* portion of our increase should be given to God –  
    not just “what's left over” at the end of the month.

But a regular part of all these OT passages is the importance of “freewill offerings”  
    or, as Deuteronomy 16:17 says,  
    “Every man shall give as he is able,  
    according to the blessing of the LORD your God that he has given you.”

Too often the OT is portrayed as a legalistic system  
    where so long as you gave your tithe, you'd be good with God!

Hogwash!  
    The OT emphasized the *heart* of the giver just as much as the NT!

This has worked out in different ways in the history of the church.  
    The idea of a “general fund” with a budget is a rather new-fangled idea.  
    It used to be that the moneys collected were simply given to the pastor,  
    and it was his job to make sure that they were properly distributed.

I, for one, am glad that we don't do it that way!

As early as the sixth century, Gregory the Great testifies  
    that it was a common practice for churches to devote ¼ of their funds  
    for the bishop and his household  
        (since the bishop was expected to show hospitality to strangers –  
        his house was frequently considered almost an inn),  
    ¼ to the clergy, ¼ for the repair and maintenance of church buildings, and ¼ for the poor.

Gregory makes it clear that this was not a mandatory practice – but a common custom.

It's worth noting that this is not talking about an individual congregation – but a “city church” –  
    something much more like a “presbytery” –  
    where all the churches in a single city would be under a single government  
    (and a single “budget” – to use the modern term).

And since we do not distinguish between “bishop” and “clergy” –  
    we can just say “half” for the ministry, a quarter for facilities, and a quarter for the poor.



For the sake of comparison, I put together the combined budgets of MCPC and LaPorte, to see how we are doing.

We are currently spending 60% on clergy, 20% on buildings/administration, and 10% on the poor, along with 10% on foreign missions (which when you consider the recipients of our foreign missions giving, this includes both a clergy aspect and a mercy aspect: Nelly is a widow – and Rex and Becca are engaged in mercy ministry.)

The church has done this in a lot of different ways over the centuries:

Pew rents, subscriptions, payment in kind

(colonial Virginia pastors often got paid in tobacco and whisky).

In fact, it was normal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for a pastor to be paid once a year!

Churches didn't have bank accounts in those days,

so the sexton, or one of the deacons

would go around to all the members once a year and collect their subscriptions, and deposit the whole sum in the pastor's bank account!

But wait, you ask, what about the offering?

Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there *was no* general fund to have a weekly general fund offering!

There were offerings taken in worship –

usually an offering for the poor in connection with the Lord's Supper (like our diaconal offering).

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, they started taking special offerings for missions or other charitable purposes.

But for most of church history,

most people didn't *have* cash to put in the offering plate every week!

Most people worked in agriculture – and the harvest came only once a year –

though there might be 2-3 different times when different crops were harvested.

So why do we “pass the plate”?

Deuteronomy 26 (which we sang – and read – earlier)

provides an example of a “general fund” offering taken twice a year – once with the firstfruits (26:1-11), and once with the tithe (26:12-19).

Plainly, Deuteronomy 26 demonstrates that the “general fund” offering – the offering for the maintenance of the ministry –

is an act of worship.

This doesn't mean that there is only one way of doing this!

Subscriptions, pew rents, a box in the back – all these methods are acceptable,

so long as the church remembers that these gifts are an act of worship.

We are bringing our gifts to God as a response to his great mercy toward us in Jesus Christ.

So Paul expects the church to follow the *principles* of OT church finance – not the precise practices.

I'm not going to try to cover point 3 today.

I think it is better to conclude today simply by saying:

“Well done.”

You have given freely (and as far as I can tell, cheerfully) for the furtherance of the gospel –  
both here and for the preaching of the Word in LaPorte,  
throughout the presbytery – and throughout the world.

You have taken care of me and my family

You have given generously to the poor –

and you have provided the resources needed to expand and maintain the church building.

Thanks be to God!