

Hindering the Gospel

1 Corinthians 8:13-9:12

How should we use our Christian rights and privileges? That is the central question in today's text. In this series on the Christian use of liberty, today's passage gives us more light about this theme. But at first glance, it seems that the writer has missed the point in chapter 9.

Overview of chapters 8 and 9

Some knowledgeable Corinthian believers had helped write a letter to Paul asking several questions. Among them was the question raised in chapter 8 about meat offered to idols. Meat was expensive in that culture, but there was a way to get great-tasting meat at a low price. In the pagan temples meat was offered to idols; since idols are "nothing" (8:4), the idols didn't eat anything! So the pagan priests made significant money on the side by selling the idol's meat in the marketplace. To believers "in the know," this was a great way to get cheap meat. However (8:7), there were some believers who could not conscientiously eat the idol's meat. To them it was a return to the idolatry from which Christ saved them. What should the knowledgeable believers do in this case?

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul emphasized how to build believers; in chapter 9 he stressed how to broadcast the Gospel. In chapter 9, we will see that Paul did everything in his power to keep from hindering the Gospel. In chapter 8, he warned the believers about being a stumbling block (8:9); by their misuse of Christian liberty, they could easily destroy their brother or sister for whom Christ died (8:11)! These warnings explain Paul's strong restatement in verse 13.

Paul's Example about Meat Eating

Paul explained the right course by his own personal example in 1 Corinthians 8:13: **"Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend."** To our ears, this sounds strange. After all, we here in the West put a lot of stress on our freedom to employ our rights and privileges. So was the Apostle Paul exaggerating? Was he using some sort of deliberate, extreme hyperbole to make a point? Or did he actually mean what he wrote?

He meant what he wrote; he wasn't exaggerating. In New Testament Greek, this verse reads: [διόπερ εἰ βρῶμα σκανδαλίζει τὸν ἀδελφόν μου **οὐ μὴ** φάγω κρέα εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ἵνα **μὴ** τὸν ἀδελφόν μου σκανδαλίσω]. The words in bold are negative, and notice that two of them [ou] [ma] are put together. In English, we would have to translate this as something like "no never," or "never not ever." We don't say it this way in English, but in New Testament Greek, it was a powerfully reinforced negative. And notice that the negative word [ma] is repeated. So this verse could be translated as "Therefore if eating [this] causes a brother of mine to stumble, I will consume no meat for the rest of the ages in order that I will not cause my brother to stumble." Paul's statement makes no distinction about public or private eating of idol's meat. In the strongest possible terms, he pointed out that he was willing to make the personal sacrifice in order that he would cause no brother to stumble back into idolatry.

So here at the outset of today's message, you must ask yourself the question. Let's make it a "fill in the blank: "If _____ makes my Christian brother or sister to stumble, I will not _____ for the rest of my earthly life." How would you fill in this blank? Here are some examples: What if smoking marijuana causes my brother to stumble? What if drinking alcohol as a beverage leads my sister to stumble? What if dressing in tight revealing clothing causes my brother to stumble back into his old ways? What if internet gambling causes my sister to fall backward? What if buying lottery tickets leads my

brother to stumble? What if overeating leads my Christian sister back into using food as a comforting idol? Would you be willing to take Paul's statement in chapter 8 and verse 13 and make it your own life principle?

In fact, this "fill in the blank" question goes to the very heart of what Christianity really is. When Jesus explained His finished work in Luke 9:22-24, He also explained what it meant to be a follower of Christ: **"²² Saying, The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day. ²³ And he said to *them* all, If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. ²⁴ For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it."**

So if the Christian life is a life of self-denial, what have you denied for yourself? And what would you be willing to sacrifice so that your Christian brother does not stumble over your example. Is this standard of Christian living just for Christ and the apostles? No, Jesus said, **"if any man will come after me . . ."** This applies to each and every Christian. In his summary statement at the end of this section, Paul wrote, **"Be ye followers of me, even as I also *am* of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).**

Paul's Example in Ministry

The question that was raised in 1 Corinthians 8:1 and 4, had to do with meat offered to idols. If that was the question, then why does Paul raise a series of other questions about his apostolic rights in chapter 9? What is his point? Has he moved on to another question? No, from 1 Corinthians 10:19-22, we can see that he is still answering the same question about meat offered to idols. But why does his answer seem so "indirect?" What do his rights as an apostle have to do with eating meats offered to idols?

■ Paul's Privileges as an Apostle

"¹ Am I not an apostle? am I not free? have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? are not ye my work in the Lord? ² If I be not an apostle unto others, yet doubtless I am to you: for the seal of mine apostleship are ye in the Lord."

No one could dispute that Paul was Christ's Apostle – a "sent one," sent by Jesus Himself. Paul was an eyewitness to the risen Jesus (Acts 18:9-10; Acts 22:7-10, 17-21). Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13, 1 Timothy 2:7, 2 Timothy 1:11). The very existence of the church at Corinth proved this fact. Let's let that sink in. What did it mean? Paul would be sharing the Gospel with people who practiced paganism. Surely, as an apostle, he should have been accorded every Christian privilege to fully practice his freedom in Christ among pagan peoples.

■ Paul's Rights as an Apostle

"³ Mine answer to them that do examine me is this, ⁴ Have we not power to eat and to drink? ⁵ Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas? ⁶ Or I only and Barnabas, have not we power to forbear working?"

✚ The Example of other Apostles, 3-6

- As a minister of Christ, Paul had the right to ask for food and drink to live, at the very least.
- He also had the right to be married (as other apostles were).
- He also had the right to set aside other forms of labor in order to give all his efforts to labor in the Word and preach the Gospel.

✚ The Example from Human Labor, 7

“7 Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges? who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof? or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock?”

A soldier going to war for his country shouldn't be expected to pay his own expenses. Those who labor to plant a garden or a vineyard should expect to profit from the produce. Those who labor with sheep or cattle should expect to receive from the product of their labors.

✚ The Illustration and Application from the Law of Moses, 8-11

“8 Say I these things as a man? or saith not the law the same also? 9 For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? 10 Or saith he *it* altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, *this* is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope. 11 If we have sown unto you spiritual things, *is it* a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?”

Though it is not his main point, Paul was explaining his philosophy of ministry – specifically of the financial support of Gospel ministers. Using a quote from Deuteronomy 25:4, Paul stressed the importance of supporting ministers of the Word. He also explained this in 1 Timothy 5:17-18. His main point in this text is to firmly establish his rights. Paul had all the rights and privileges of an apostle.

How Paul Used His Rights and Privileges

What is the connection between these verses and the question raised in 1 Corinthians 8? The Corinthians had insisted that they had rights and privileges that granted them freedom. So Paul asked, “Am I not free?” Consider the way that Paul has leveraged his argument, and then consider his example in verse 12: **“12 If others be partakers of *this* power over you, *are* not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used *this* power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ.”**

Note that the word “power” occurs twice in this verse, and both times it translates the same word. The word is the Greek word [*exousia*] meaning “power” or “authority,” and referring to his freedom or right to choose. Paul told the Corinthians plainly: “we have power over you,” but said, “we have not used this power.” Just so we don't miss the point, consider where this word has appeared in our series so far (underlined in the verses below):

- 1 Corinthians 8:9 “But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.”
- 1 Corinthians 9:4 “Have we not power to eat and drink?”
- 1 Corinthians 9:5 “Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife . . .”
- 1 Corinthians 9:6 “Have not we power to forbear working?”

In a remarkable fashion, Paul referred to the Corinthians' “liberty” (8:9) and then carefully explained his own apostolic rights and privileges. And then Paul explained the Christian use of liberty:

“12 If others be partakers of *this* power over you, *are* not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used *this* power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ.”

■ Paul used his liberty as he “suffered” or “endured” all things.

The word translated as “suffered” or “endured” here is not the ordinary word that the apostle used. It is the Greek word [*stego*] meaning “to cover: – especially to cover with silence. Love, for instance, “bears all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7, translating the same word). Paul's point here is that instead of loudly insisting on his rights, he chose to endure quietly. Why did he do this?

■ ***Paul used his liberty in such a way that he would not hinder the Gospel of Christ.***

Paul's earnest desire was expressed in 1 Thessalonians 3:1, "**Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you:**" This is similar to the preaching of John the Baptist (using Isaiah 40) when he preached, "**Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight**" (Matthew 3:3). In 1 Corinthians 9:12, the word "hinder" refers to an obstacle, obstruction or detour. Paul wanted the Gospel to run swiftly, so he chose to "prepare the way of the Lord." He refused to use his "rights" in a way that would obstruct the Gospel. Apparently, it was very common for the pagan teachers of the day to profit from their teaching. To avoid any apparently conflict of interest, Paul chose not to receive financial support from those he was evangelizing. Other churches supported him (see Philippians 4:14-18), but Paul refused to charge those he was ministering to at the time.

Applications

- ✓ Don't insist on your rights. But in a God-honoring fashion use your power to build believers without becoming a stumbling block. And use your freedom in a way that you do not obstruct the Gospel.
- ✓ There are those among us today who have been quietly pressing on for the sake of the Gospel for many years. They have given of their wealth generously to support this church and its ministries – even when others have given very little, or not at all.
- ✓ There are those who have prepared diligently Sunday after Sunday to teach Sunday School while others were mere spectators, sometimes complaining about the length of the messages or the length of the lessons.
- ✓ Some quietly endured by using their vehicles to transport children and people to the services. Others prided themselves on the fact that they saved their vehicles from wear and tear.
- ✓ Some here have quietly served to unlock and lock our buildings or stayed behind to clean up after activities. Others enjoyed using their time in a leisurely fashion.
- ✓ Some have given time to service after service, Sunday morning, Sunday School, Sunday evenings and gathering at mid-week services to pray. They endured quietly – using their liberty to build believers and broadcast the Gospel.

In closing, remember what Jesus did for all of us; go and do likewise. 2 Corinthians 8:9, "**For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.**" The Son of God left His rich privileges in heaven to serve you and me by His death on the cross for our sins. He rose again to prove our freedom from death and hell. Would you deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him?

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