

Challenges Christians Face

Paul's Pattern of Self-Denial

1 Corinthians 9:1-18

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Paul's Pattern of Self-Denial

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of Christian liberty. You may recall that *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* was in fact Paul's response to a letter he had received from them. Six times in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul said, "Now concerning. . ." (7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; and 16:12). And six times Paul responded to a question or issue raised in the letter that he had received from the Corinthians.

In 1 Corinthians 8:1 Paul said, "Now concerning food offered to idols. . . ." This was the third of six issues. All of chapter 8 deals with the issue of food offered to idols. The Corinthian Christians were engaged in a debate about whether it was okay to eat meat offered to idols. This was an issue on which God had not clearly revealed his will. It was therefore a debatable matter, and the Christians in Corinth were divided over the issue. Some said it was okay to eat meat offered to idols; others said it was not okay.

Paul responded to their question by setting down a foundational principle in 1 Corinthians 8:13: "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." Paul would never do anything to cause his brother in Christ to stumble. He was willing to limit his Christian freedom in order to love his brother in Christ. His principle was that Christians must deny themselves their rights for the sake of the gospel.

It seems, then, that when we come to 1 Corinthians 9 Paul has finished dealing with the matter of food offered to idols and has gone on to a different issue. But, in actual fact, chapter 9 is not a digression at all. Paul was now illustrating from his own life the very principle he laid down in chapter 8. His principle of self-denial for the sake of the gospel in chapter 8 was illustrated by his

pattern of self-denial for the sake of the gospel in chapter 9.

Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Paul's Pattern of Self-Denial."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 9:1-18:

¹ Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? ² 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.

³ This is my defense to those who would examine me. 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? 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?

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." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? ¹² If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?

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. 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.

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. 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! ¹⁷ For if I do this of my own will, I have

a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. 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. (1 Corinthians 9:1-18)

Introduction

Many years ago a retired couple who were newcomers to our church asked to see me. They told me that they had been invited to lunch at a member's home. They were surprised to have been offered wine, and wanted to know our church's view regarding the use of alcohol. I said that we understood the Scriptures to teach that regarding wine consumption was appropriate but drunkenness was condemned. The retired couple left our church.

When I talked with the member who had offered the retired couple the wine, he said that he was exercising his Christian liberty. The Scriptures said that drinking wine was okay, and the fact that the retired couple had difficulty with that was their problem and not his problem.

The English writer G. K. Chesterton once said, "To have a right to do a thing is not at all the same as to be right in doing it."¹

Not all Christians agree on the point that it is okay to drink wine. And even though some Christians understand that they may have a right to drink wine, it may not always be right to do so. The principle that guides us in debatable matters is that we are to forsake our rights for the sake of the gospel.

Paul dealt with a similar issue with the Corinthian Christians. In order to encourage the Corinthian Christians to forsake their rights for the sake of other Christians, Paul described his entire ministry as one of self-denial for the sake of the gospel.

Lesson

So, in our lesson today, we learn that we must forsake our

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (London, England: Chatto & Windus, 1917), n.p.

rights for the sake of the gospel. Let's examine Paul's pattern of self-denial regarding material support (as an illustration of food offered to idols or of drinking wine) by the following two points:

1. Paul's Right to Receive Material Support (9:1-14).
2. Paul's Refusal to Receive Material Support (9:15-18).

I. Paul's Right to Receive Material Support (9:1-14)

First, let's look at Paul's right to receive material support.

In verses 1-14 Paul gave six reasons why he had the right to be supported by the churches to whom he ministered. The first reason applied only to apostles, and therefore does not apply today. However, the other five reasons apply to every minister, missionary, and vocational Christian worker in every time of history.

A. *He Was an Apostle (9:1-6)*

First, Paul had a right to receive material support because he was an apostle.

Verse 1 is composed of four questions. Paul began by asking in verse 1a: **“Am I not free?”** The Corinthians made much of their liberty to do whatever they wanted. Paul stated that he was also **free**. And he went on to list the rights to which he was entitled.

Next, he asked in verse 1b: **“Am I not an apostle?”** Some in Corinth apparently were challenging Paul's apostleship.

So he gave them two verifications of his apostleship. First, he had seen Jesus: **“Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?”** (9:1c). And second, the Corinthians themselves were evidence of his apostleship: **“Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?”** (9:1d). The transforming power of the gospel that Paul preached was evidence that he had been sent by God. So, he said to them in verse 2: **“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 was an apostle with all the rights of an apostle. He defended these rights by saying in verse 3: **“This is my defense to**

those who would examine me.” He then asked three questions in verses 4-5: **“Do we not have the right to eat and drink? 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? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?”**

Paul’s point was that he had a right to material support because he was an apostle.

B. It Was Customary (9:7)

Second, Paul had a right to receive material support because it was customary.

Paul gave three illustrations to show that it was customary to receive support from one’s labors. He asked three questions about a soldier, a farmer, and a shepherd in verse 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?”**

All workers got something in return for their work. It was customary, right, and expected for the soldier, farmer, and shepherd, for example. So, why should that not be true for Paul as well?

C. It Was God’s Law (9:8-11)

Third, Paul had a right to receive material support because it was God’s Law.

Paul asked in verse 8a: **“Do I say these things on human authority?”** Or, was there a higher Law that confirmed Paul’s point? So, he asked another question in verse 8b: **“Does not the Law say the same?”**

Then, quoting Deuteronomy 25:4, Paul said in verse 9a, **“For it is written in the Law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.’”** In biblical times, at least two methods of treading grain were practiced. At times, stalks of grain

were spread out over a flat hard surface called a threshing floor. Oxen or horses dragged a weighted board across the grain by walking around and around a central post. At other times, the animals simply walked on the grain with their feet. Old Testament Law did not allow farmers to muzzle the treading animals. God's Law permitted the animals to eat as they worked.²

But, **is it for oxen that God is concerned (9:9b)?** Yes, but God is far more concerned about people. So, Paul asked in verse 10a: **“Does he [i.e., God] not speak entirely for our sake?”** Yes, he does, as Paul continued in verse 10b: **“It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop.”** In other words, the **plowman** and the **thresher** work in order to receive material support for their labors.

So, Paul asked a very direct question in verse 11: **“If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?”**

God's Law provided that the worker be paid for his work. Similarly, Paul argued that he had a right to receive material support because it was God's Law.

D. It Was Done for Others (9:12a)

Fourth, Paul had a right to receive material support because it was done for others.

The Corinthians apparently supported other Christian ministers, such as Apollos and Peter (cf. 1:12; 3:22). As the church's founding pastor, Paul surely had an even greater claim on their support. So, he asked in verse 12a: **“If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?”**

E. It Was Done in the Old Testament (9:13)

Fifth, Paul had a right to receive material support because it

² Richard L. Pratt, Jr., vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 147.

was done in the Old Testament.

Paul asked in verse 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?”**

The priests were supported from the crops and animals that the people brought to be offered to God in worship. A portion of the offering was given to the priests. So, the Jewish people were accustomed to their ministers being supported by the material gifts that they brought.

Paul argued that what was done in the Old Testament was now to be continued in supporting the New Testament ministers.

F. Jesus Commanded It (9:14)

And sixth, Paul had a right to receive material support because Jesus commanded it.

Just in case people wanted to dispute the practice of providing material support to ministers in the New Testament, Paul said in verse 14: **“In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.”**

When Jesus sent out the seventy on an evangelistic mission, he said that “the laborer deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7; cf. also Matthew 10:10).

So, Paul gave six reasons why he had the right to be supported by the churches to whom he ministered. Paul had the right to receive material support because he was an apostle, it was customary, it was God’s Law, it was done for others, it was done in the Old Testament, and Jesus commanded it.

II. Paul’s Refusal to Receive Material Support (9:12b; 15-18)

Second, now let’s look at Paul’s refusal to receive material support.

Paul has vigorously argued that he had a right to receive ma-

terial support for his ministry in the gospel. Astonishingly, however, he refused to receive material support from the Corinthians.

Paul gave two reasons for refusing to receive material support from the Corinthians. One reason was negative, and the other was positive.

A. The Negative Reason (9:12b)

First, the negative reason. Paul refused to receive material support because he did not want anything to hinder the gospel.

We see this reason given back in verse 12b: **“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 did not want anything at all to be a hindrance to people hearing and receiving the gospel of Christ.

Commentator Gordon D. Fee says that “philosophers and wandering missionaries in the Greco-Roman world were ‘supported’ by four means: fees, patronage [i.e. support given by a wealthy benefactor], begging, and working. Each of these had both proponents and detractors, who viewed rival forms as not worthy of philosophy.”³ Really good speakers were able to collect large amounts of money before moving on to the next city.

Paul did not want to receive any financial support from local Christians, who might view him as just another travelling orator or preacher. He wanted nothing to hinder his preaching of the gospel.

So, for that reason, he refused to receive material support from the Corinthians.

B. The Positive Reason (9:15-18)

And second, the positive reason. Paul refused to receive material support because he was compelled to preach the gospel free of charge.

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 399.

Paul's point in verses 14-18 is that he was compelled to preach the gospel free of charge. He said in verse 16, **“For necessity is laid upon me.”** Paul did not decide that he was tired of being a Pharisee and wanted to see the world. So, he decided to become a preacher of the gospel. No. When he was on the road to Damascus he encountered the resurrected Jesus Christ, and he received a commission to go into the world and preach the gospel.

Paul went through stunning hardships to obey Jesus' command to preach the gospel. He wrote later to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 11:22-27, “I am a [servant of Christ] with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.”

What then was Paul's reward? He said, **“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”** (9:18).

Paul refused to receive material support from the Corinthians, even though he had a right to receive such support, in order to preach the gospel free of charge.

Paul's policy was not to receive material support from the people to whom he was currently preaching. He wrote to the Thessalonian church, “For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:9). In his next letter to the Thessalonian church, he repeated his policy, “Nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you” (2 Thessalonians 3:8).

Now, after Paul left Thessalonica he did receive material support from them. But not while he was with them. They were among the Macedonian churches that supported Paul materially while he ministered in Corinth, as he said to the Corinthians in his second letter in 2 Corinthians 11:8-9, "I robbed other churches [i.e., figuratively, not literally] by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way."

Paul was like our modern missionaries. We do not send missionaries into a foreign land and expect them to receive material support from the people to whom they are trying to reach with the gospel. No. That would not be right. Instead, we support them materially. But when the gospel takes root in a foreign country we increasingly expect the national Christians to pick up the financial support of those who are ministering the gospel to them.

Conclusion

So, how does all of this apply to us? Remember that chapter 9 is illustrating chapter 8. Chapter 8 teaches us that we must never do anything to cause our brother in Christ to stumble. We must limit our Christian freedom in order to love our brother in Christ. Paul simply illustrated that he was willing to deny himself his right to material support for the sake of the gospel.

The member in our church years ago who offered the retired couple wine should have denied himself his right to wine (at least, in their presence) for the sake of the gospel. He should have limited his freedom in order to love his brother and sister in Christ.

May God help us to love our brothers and sisters in Christ well. May we never do anything to cause them to stumble spiritually, but let us be willing to forsake our rights for the sake of the gospel. Amen.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

O Lord our God, you have given us your Word, which is our guide. Sometimes, however, we do not all agree on what your Word teaches. Help us to love our brothers and sisters well. Help us to forsake our rights for the sake of the gospel.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and love your brothers and sisters well and be willing to forsake your rights for the sake of the gospel.