

Jason Upchurch - 1 Corinthians 9:1-27 - How to Win the Prize

One of the great truths of the gospel is that through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ we have freedom. Before we were believers in Jesus there was only suffocating bondage. But now in Christ we are free.

We are free from sin.

John 8:34-36: Truly, truly I say to you everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin...so if the Son sets you free you are free indeed.

In Jesus we have freedom from our sin. We are no longer defined by it. We are no longer mastered by it. We are not imprisoned. Jesus has set us free.

Jesus has also set us free from all the legal requirements of the OC.

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

In the OT there were 613 Laws that governed the lives of the Jewish people from the time of Moses onward. Over the course of time the Jews added thousands of additional man made laws to those God-given laws.

But in Christ we've been set free from that. In fact, we are commanded to not submit again to the yoke of slavery.

In the late 1700s different states were on different pages with the issue of slavery. Some states allowed it, others had outlawed it. And slaves were very often very conflicted about what to do and what their role in life was. Many would be emancipated but not know what to do with themselves and just voluntarily go back to a life of slavery because that's all they knew.

Many times people who claim Christ forsake the freedom we have in Christ and submit themselves to the Law for no reason.

The freedom that we have in Christ is precious freedom. And it's not freedom from any law at all. It's not antinomian where we just go do whatever we want to do.

No, we are now under the Law of Christ where actually those external laws have been written on our heart and we desire not just to do the letter of the Law but we desire to obey the spirit of the Law because the Holy Spirit is inside of us, guiding us and empowering us to act and live as children of God.

We are the freest people there are.

It's with that understanding we come to this passage. Paul is going to talk about some of the rights and freedoms we have. But here's the amazing thing: in the gospel, we often give up those rights and freedoms for the good of our brothers.

Remember from last week, the Corinthians were claiming that it was their right to go down to the pagan temple and grab a steak dinner. They claimed they had freedom in Christ to do that. Paul will specifically tell them later on that that is idolatry and, no, they don't have freedom to commit idolatry.

But more than that, the problem with the Corinthians is that they think they can just do whatever they want with no regard for their brothers and sisters in the Lord. They're so self-centered that they don't realize that their actions are causing their brothers in the church to sin.

And so Paul says "You want to take about rights and freedoms?" Let me tell you about my rights and freedoms as an apostle. And how I gave them all up to serve you in Corinth. He actually uses himself as an example for the Corinthians to follow.

"You only came to faith in Jesus because I gave up my rights for you."

Now, the primary right that Paul talks about here is his right to be paid as a minister of the gospel of Christ. To some extent this is a “pay your preacher” section of Scripture. But what we’re going to see is that for the sake of the gospel there are times when that legitimate right ministers of the gospel have to be paid is given up for the sake of the very gospel they preach.

We’ll see that in a bit.

Here’s the the big takeaway this morning is that if you want to do great things for the Lord, you’ll learn to give up your rights.

The way you hear “Well done good and faithful servant” and to see fruit from investing in peoples’ lives and sacrificing for other people is to actually give up the very rights that God has granted you in Christ.

And actually, the more you are willing to give up for the gospel the greater God s able to use you for his glory.

So I want to just walk through this passage this morning but know that the big picture is if you want to do great things for the Lord you’ll learn to give up your rights.

First, we see that Paul establishes his authority in the Corinthian church. **Read 1-2**

So what Paul is doing here is establishing his authority in the Corinthian church. As an authority, he has rights. We’ll see that in a minute.

And I don’t know if you caught this, but he makes most of this argument with rhetorical questions. He asks these questions and the answer is implied. He does this because he wants to show the Corinthians that they already know all of this. They know personally how Paul gave up his rights.

He asks first: Am I not free?

He is free from the Law. He is not bound to the OC in any way. He doesn’t need to submit to food laws, or cleanliness laws, or ceremonial laws, of feast laws or any other laws.

This freedom he has is a freedom all Christians have, actually. But he especially claims this freedom because he is an apostle. **Read 1**

In English when we ask a rhetorical question, the answer is just implied. In Greek, the answer is explicit in how the question is phrased. So when he asks “Am I not an apostle?” In Greek the answer is explicitly “Yes I am.”

The word apostle means someone who is sent on a mission. The apostles - the initial 12 and then more later - were those who were specifically commissioned by God to preach the gospel ass missionaries and authorities in the church.

Another qualification for an apostle was that they had seen the resurrected Jesus, which Paul says he had. **Read 1**

Again, the explicit answer Paul is looking for here is “Yes I have seen Jesus.” Paul is a legitimate apostle in the Church of God, having seen the risen Jesus and having been sent by Jesus.

In the book of Acts the story of Paul’s conversion is given 3 times because it is so significant to the work of God in spreading the gospel. His conversion is highlighted by an appearance of Jesus who appears to him in the blazing brightness of his glory as Saul is going to Damascus to throw believers in prison. Jesus’s gracious appearance to Saul not only transforms his life, but the lives of thousands of others - including the Corinthians.

And they should know that. If any church could testify to the radical work of God through Paul it was them. **Read 1-2**

The Corinthians knew firsthand how God had used Paul in their midst to bring the gospel to them. He was the first one who came to them preaching the gospel. They sat under his teaching for a year and a half and watched as many in the Jewish synagogue abandoned their Judaism for Jesus. Many in the pagan cults abandoned their idolatry for Jesus. The gifts of the Holy Spirit were on full display.

They knew Paul was an authority. They knew he had been sent by God. And because of that they also knew he had rights. **Read 3-7**

Now, the two rights he touches on here are the right to eat and drink - meaning he's no longer under the Law - and the right to be paid for his service.

But he spends more time on the right to be paid. And the point is that he gave up that right so that the Corinthians would come to faith in Jesus. Their church is literally founded on an apostle who gave up his rights to a paycheck in order to serve them. If he can give up his rights to a paycheck, they can give up their rights to eat meat.

Again, he hits them with a series of rhetorical questions. **Read 4**

Remember, that at the end of Chapter 8 he made it clear that he would be willing to never eat meat again if eating food made other believers stumble. **Read 8:13**

But eating meat was a right. It was something that he - and every Christian - have a right to. Christians are no longer under the Law so we are free to eat any kind of food we want.

But then he turns it quickly to another right - maybe a more important right for a missionary - and that's the right to be financially supported in their ministry.

In **Vs. 5** he says they have the right to take along a believing wife. Neither Paul nor Barnabas were married, but the other apostles were. And not only could they expect to be financially supported, but they had the right to expect enough financial support for them and their family as well.

When people are called to serve in ministry - whether pastors or missionaries or others - the expectation from God is that their whole family is supported.

And Paul makes this argument from simply looking at other professions as well as looking at the OT. First, he looks at other professions. **Read 7**

So soldiers don't serve in the military at their own expense. There is an expectation that they will be paid for their work. Same thing with someone who owns a vineyard. You raise all these grapes, make this fantastic wine - why wouldn't you drink some of the wine?

If you were a shepherd tending a flock of goats, you'd drink from some of the milk. That's just part of deal. You sustain yourself by your livelihood. This is just common sense.

But the OT said the same thing. **Read 8-10**

Now this is an interesting passage. It's from **Deuteronomy 25:4** and it comes after 3 verses talking about how many times you can whip someone who is guilty of a crime and just before a passage on how if a married man dies and his younger brother is single, the younger brother should marry the widow. If the younger man doesn't marry the widow, she gets to take the younger brother's sandal and spit in his face in front of town elders. That would be a fun town hall meeting.

In the middle of all that action, there's this verse about how to take care of animals in Israel. God actually made many laws about the treatment of animals in the Law. He was concerned for them.

Here, the Israelites would cut down their stalks of grain, and put it down in this round pen called a threshing floor. And an ox would pull a little sled over the stalks which would break the grain from the chaff and cause the grain to fall to the ground. This would separate the wheat from the chaff.

And the farmer would occasionally take his pitchfork and throw the chaff out of the pen leaving just the grain on the ground. At the end of the day you'd be left with this threshing floor filled with grain.

Well, God said you couldn't put a muzzle on the ox because then he couldn't eat the grain. God's saying: "He's out in the hot field working to get the grain, so you better let him grab a bite of the grain. Don't starve your ox." God cares about animals.

And Paul says, "Actually, this verse isn't even primarily about oxen."

Apparently most Jewish scholars at the time had recognized that this was a classic lesser-to-greater argument in the Law. If God wants to make sure oxen get fed by their work, how much more does he want to ensure people get fed by their work?

Paul says that's what God had in mind when Moses wrote that Law.

Now, he makes the connection very clear in the next couple of verses. **Read 11-12**

So there's a little back and forth here. But the point is that Paul preached the gospel to them. He was their founding pastor. They owe their eternal life to Jesus, but they heard that saving gospel from Paul.

And he's like, "I sacrificed life and limb to give you the message of eternal life...is too much for me to ask for a little money from you? You're financially supporting some of your other leaders, don't you think it's appropriate to support me - Paul - who initially gave you the message of eternal life?"

Of course the answer is yes. It is right for him to have a reasonable expectation of support. Actually, we see this idea of support in the OT sacrificial system. **Read 12b-14**

So in the OT the Israelites would come to the Temple and offer sacrifices to the Lord. Sometimes a bull or sheep or goat. And depending on the sacrifice only part of the animal was burned up. What do you do with all the rest of that meat? Well you get to eat some, the priests got to eat some. The priests literally partook of the sacrifices that the Israelites brought to the Temple. They fed on the offerings to God.

Little Side: Remember, what's the big issue in **chapters 8-10**? It's eating meat offered to false gods in their temples. If eating meat in the Temple in Judaism was an act of worship, what's it called when you eat meat in a pagan temple called? Idolatry.

This is actually a clever point Paul makes. He's killing like 3 birds with one stone.

Even the pagans know you pay your preacher. The true God had that system at the Temple as well. But what did Paul do according to the second part of **Vs. 12**? He gave up that right. **Read 12b, 15**

Again, this is a classic pay-your-preacher a passage. The Lord has designed that those who give their lives to ministry in gospel service should receive payment. That's actually a command from God; a right that ministers have.

But notice, Paul willingly gives up this right. He says he hasn't made use of those rights. He could have told the Corinthians to pay him. And he would have been right to do so. But he didn't **Turn** back to **Acts 18** for a minute. This is Paul in Corinth when he founded the church. What was Paul's occupation? He was a tent maker. **Read 1-4**

This is where we get the phrase "tent maker" from. When so and so is a tent maker it means they have a job that pays them so that they can also do ministry. It's also called bivocational ministry. Bi - meaning 2; vocation

meaning job. Some pastors and missionaries have 2 jobs to ensure the gospel is preached. I would say the vast majority of pastors in the world are bivocational because most congregations are smaller and can't afford to support them.

In Corinth, Paul was a tent maker. Most tents were made of leather so he was a leather worker. But this is how he supported himself while he was in Corinth.

Now, look back at **1 Cor. 9**. Why did Paul not ask to get paid from the Corinthians? Why did he work when he could have just said "Hey, can you please pay me?" He does that so they can't accuse him of preaching the gospel only for the money. He doesn't want anyone to ever accuse him of being in ministry just for a paycheck.

Read 15-18

What is he saying? Does he just want to brag that he doesn't take their money? Is that why he keeps using the word "boasting?" Well, it could sound like that, but that's not quite the case.

Here's the deal: he knows he needs to preach the gospel. Whether he gets paid or not Jesus has commanded him to preach the gospel. So he's gotta preach. But he would rather die than someone accuse him of preaching just for the money.

So why use the word boasting? I think he's being a little sarcastic. Remember in the beginning of the book the Corinthians had a problem with boasting about their favorite preachers? Some boasted in Apollos, some Peter, some Paul? I think he's being sarcastic. "If you guys are going to brag over your leaders, I'm going to brag too. That I didn't charge you for anything!"

In fact, Paul rarely took money from the church where he was at. **Look at 1 Thes. 2:9-12** for a minute. He says sort of the same thing here. **Read 9-12**

Same idea. Paul never wanted anyone to think he came to town preaching the gospel in order to get a paycheck. He never wanted to burden his hearers. Now, he did often receive gifts from other churches like a missionary would.

Now, the point that he's making **back in 1 Cor. 9** is that he had this right. He had the right to collect a paycheck from the Corinthians. But he didn't do that. They saw his example. Paul was their father in the faith and they literally watched him give up his rights so that they could have the gospel from a man who could never be accused of just preaching for money.

You know we have stand up comedians who travel from town to town and that's how they make their living? Well in Paul's day they had that too as well as professional speech makers called orators. And they would stay in a town for a while to make money.

Paul says "I'm not a speech maker for hire - that's not my goal. My goal is to preach Jesus."

Actually everywhere he goes he gives up all kinds of rights so that people can hear the gospel. **Read 19-23**

If he's around Jews, he gives up the liberty he has under the Law so that Jews will hear the gospel. He eats kosher and goes to synagogue and abides by the Law. He doesn't have to because in Jesus he's free from that. But he knows the only way some people will hear him is if he gives up his rights to give him the opportunity to preach.

If he's talking to those outside the Law - Gentiles - he eats pork ribs and bacon and does whatever he needs to do to preach them the gospel.

If he's talking to people weak in the faith - maybe they don't drink wine or beer - he gives up wine and beer. He can have those things, but gives them up. Why? Why give up your rights? **Read 22-23**

Because he wants people to come to faith in Jesus. In Christ we have a whole bunch of rights. We have all kinds of liberty. Praise God. Can you imagine living under the OT Law? Can you imagine all the restrictions and rules and ins and outs that ruled every aspect of life? We're free from all of that!

But exerting our rights is not the highest goal in the life of a follower of Jesus. The highest goal is doing whatever we have to do - giving up whatever we have to give up - in order for people to hear the message of salvation by faith alone in Jesus alone.

I mean, if you knew that by giving up bacon for the rest of your life 5 people would come to faith in Jesus, would you do it? What if you had to give up alcohol? What if you gave up movies? All so someone would come to faith?

Of course you would. You realize how petty some of the rights we have are in light of the big picture.

And Paul pushes this to the most extreme conclusion, and this is what I want you to take home: If you want to do great things for the Lord, you'll be glad to give up your rights.

In fact, those who do the most in life are those who give up the most. **Read 24-27**

What's his point here? That the greatest athletes give up the most. That's how they become great.

Most of you know Michael Phelps - the Olympic swimmer who won a million gold medals. He had the right to sleep in, to eat junk food, to skip practices, to only give 50% effort in practice.

But if he had claimed those rights he would never have been an Olympic champion. Those who do the most in life give up the most.

I love reading biographies of people and most of them give up their rights to pursue excellence and achieve great things. There aren't a lot of biographies about well-rounded people. Most famous people are messed up in some special way.

Paul says basically the same thing: you want to do great things for the gospel? You won't be claiming your liberties and your rights to do whatever you want. If you want to do great things for the gospel you're going to be giving up a lot of things. You will sacrifice your freedoms and liberties so that other people will listen to the message of the gospel.

You'll give up what is yours through the gospel so that those who are young in the faith will grow in maturity and godliness.

You'll do that because Jesus gave up his rights for you. He gave up his place of glory and honor and power and praise and sacrificed himself so that you could have eternal life.

So run your race of faith that you may obtain the prize. Don't cling to your rights. Give them up. For the good of the gospel and the glory of God.

Pray