

1 Corinthians 9

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[0 : 00] Well, we're in 1 Corinthians 9, and if you can turn back there, that'll be a help, page 957. Continuing this journey through the letter, and Paul has been explaining various things! about the situation in Corinth and the church there, but he's also begun to address the questions that previous correspondence with the Corinthian church has raised with him.

And here we are at chapter 9. When we think about life, when we look around, we think about the way things are in the world, we realize that having ourselves at the center of things is really something we find easy and natural, and it comes to us without much effort. Life with us at the center.

If you look around, and we could go right to the very top, there's a class of people, it seems, in our culture today who have all the means and all the connections, and the normal rules of life don't apply, and they can do what they want. And they can do all kinds of things that other people might end up getting in trouble for, and it doesn't seem to stick with them. In a sense, there's a, we get this impression that they believe that the world actually exists to serve them. A really crass example of having yourself at the center. And we might look at celebrities. Celebrities get things given to them all the time. Because they are celebrities, whether in sport or film or music or drama or whatever it might be, when they're famous, people want to give them stuff because they want to curry favor with them. And when people give you stuff all the time, you become entitled, and you think that that's the way the world works. Well, I should have that because that's the way things are. We see it in all kinds of other ways as well. The employee who says that they can't work five days a week. They can't stay late in order to finish this project because they've got to look after their mental health or their self-care or whatever it might be. They can't wear certain fabrics or eat certain foods. Can't bear certain noises because it's just too much for me.

Now, of course, that's not to denigrate those that struggle in those ways, but there is a sense in which that is the condition of the human heart. Actually, all the way through, me first, my preferences, my opinions, my voice. I'm actually in charge of my world. And then the spirit that flows from that is, well, I want it, and therefore I should have it, whatever it might be. And it's all very natural.

No one needed to tell us to think of ourselves in this way. It is part of, well, it's the air that we breathe for a start. Some are able to have it more easily than others, and some are more honest about their pursuit of those things than others. But we naturally incline, because of our sinful condition, to me first. When someone shows you a photograph, the first place you look is for yourself. You zoom in.

[3 : 08] How do I look? Well, that spirit is, it runs all the way through society because it runs all the way through all of our hearts. And that is why we find what Paul said last week in chapter 8 and this week in chapter 9 so strange. Last week we heard him say that we should put other people ahead of our personal preferences. And when the me at the center of things, when that message is everywhere, it's no surprise that this kind of teaching feels on the one hand out of touch, and on the other hand, completely impossible for us to apply in our own lives. To go against that spirit that seems to run all the way through society because it runs all the way through our heart, well, is it even possible to do this? So we need to get to grips with what he's saying here. The issue last time you remember was meat offered to idols. Corinth was a pluralistic city where there were many gods that were worshiped, and part of the worship required animals to be sacrificed and the meat from those animals to be offered to the respective gods. And Paul told us last time, whilst the meat itself has no moral value, whether it is offered to Zeus or Diana or whoever, it does nothing to the meat. Anything that's attributed to the meat, he says, is superstition. But there will be times, he said, when you should forego eating for the sake of someone else. You may know that the idol is nothing. You

may know that that steak that was offered to the idol is nothing. You may know that the words used over it in the pagan worship were also nothing. Chapter 8 verse 4, he talks about that there. You may know that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. You know that. You know that you're free to say grace over whatever is in front of you to eat it up and to enjoy that satisfying feeling that follows to the glory of God. But the new Christian, freshly converted from some kind of idol worship, can't separate the food from the idols. In their mind, they can't make that distinction. And so Paul says, it is better for you to go without that food in order to protect your brother or sister than to lead them into sin by your knowledge. That's where we were last week. It doesn't sound very, I want it, I should have it, does it? It doesn't sound very, I need to prioritize my preferences for my self-care. But this is what the

Christian life requires. It requires that we would go without certain things for the sake of other people. It requires that we would give up our rights for the sake of others. We could summarize, you remember I mentioned it last week, the Christian ethic could be summarized in four words. The whole thing, my life for yours. The ethic of the Christian life could be summarized in those four words, my life for yours. That was what Christ did. That is what those who follow Him should do. Well, this morning we have Paul explaining how this worked out in his life. Verse 1, am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? Like he did right back in chapter 2 when he referred to his style of preaching, Paul is using himself here as an example of the point that he's making. He's saying, I've told you to put other people before yourself. We saw last week that he's telling them to do this, even when the other person is wrong. That was an important qualification. Even when they're wrong, even when you have a right to eat what you want to eat. I told you to put people before yourself, even in those situations. He's saying, and here's how I have done this myself. Chapter 9, he starts with his status as an apostle. Verse 1, he has seen, he has spoken to, he was commissioned by the Lord Jesus Christ. And all the Corinthians, they of all people he's saying should know this because he planted their church. Many of those hearing this letter, as it is read out, will know that they came to faith under this man's preaching. And so they are, verse 2, the seal of his apostleship.

They are the proof that he was a legitimate apostle. Their very faith itself points to the fact that he was the real deal as a gospel preacher. And that means he has rights. And that's our first point. Paul lays out his rights, his rights. Piles up the rhetorical questions there in verse 4. Look at verse 4. 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?

As a minister of the gospel, Paul has a right to eat and to whatever will support a wife and family, just like the other apostles did. He and Barnabas aren't special cases. They have a right to be financially supported in their ministry, just as the others were. And Paul points to how this principle is both obvious and biblical, and it's something that the Corinthians implemented previously. So he says it's a principle that you see generally, 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? He's saying we don't expect soldiers to buy their own uniforms. We don't expect them to procure their own weapons. We expect a farmer to be able to enjoy the fruit of his crops and the shepherd to get some of the milk from his herds. Everyone has a right to profit from their own labor, but this isn't just an idea humans have come up with. Paul says, look around. You see it generally, that's the way you think about the world, but it is also, verse 9, it is a biblical principle.

[9 : 04] Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the law say the same? 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?

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. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If we've sown the spiritual, is it too much to expect that we would receive material? The verse Paul quotes here is Deuteronomy 25, verse 4, and it is applied in 1 Timothy 5, 18 as well. It's not really about oxen, he's saying. It applies to them, of course, but it is ultimately, it ultimately has humans, it has ministers in view. It was written for our sake, Paul says. The plowman has a right to share in the crop as does the thresher, and it's the same for ministers of the gospel, verse 14. The Lord commanded those who proclaim the gospel as the apostles had done to get their living from doing that. It is biblical. It's there in both

testaments. The minister has a right to profit from his labor, and actually, the Corinthians already knew that. Verse 12, if others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more. So, it's a general principle, it's a biblical principle, but it's also been their practice. They've paid other ministers. It's possible here, perhaps, that he's referring to Apollos. Do you remember Apollos back at the beginning of the letter? I planted, Apollos watered. I follow Paul, I follow Apollos. Apollos was the pastor that came in after Paul to the Corinthian church, and they paid him. So, they've shown that they understand this right as far as it applies to others. So, Paul highlights here his rights. People should profit from their labors. It's biblical. It applies to gospel ministers, and the Corinthians know this because they've been doing it already. But why does Paul say all that? He says it in order to make it clear to them that he has passed it all up. He has a right to all of these things, and he could make that demand, but he has said, I'm passing it up. And here's our second point. Outlines his rights. His second point is his sacrifice, his sacrifice. Verse 12, 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. Go down again to verse 15, But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. Paul has passed on his rights, and he isn't talking about them now in order to call them in either. There is something more important to him than getting what he owed, and that is getting people to Christ. He will, verse 12, endure anything rather than be an obstacle to people hearing the gospel. He would rather die, verse 15, than have someone take away his ability to say he gave up these rights. That is how important it is to him. If Paul had been paid double honor, he would have been worth every penny, but he chose not to take it for the sake of his mission. It is a mission that is tethered to, that he is tethered to by God. Verse 16, he says he needs to preach the gospel. In fact, woe to him if he doesn't. So it's not about him. Having said all of this stuff at the beginning about his rights, he's making it really clear it's not about him. It's about doing what God has called him to do, and that is preaching the free grace of Christ for free, whatever the sacrifice. So, verse 19,

I am free from all, but I have made myself a servant to all that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win the Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law, though not myself under the law, that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. So the apostle Paul, with all of his rights and all of his freedoms, became a Jew. That is, he will have adopted some Jewish practices he submitted to the law in some areas that would have limited him in ways that he didn't have to be limited. This may relate to the discipline that he received in 2 Corinthians 11, where the lashes meted out there were consistent with the law's punishment for blasphemy, something that the synagogue would have deemed his preaching of Christ to be, and he accepted the punishment for this as a Jew. To those outside the law, the Gentiles who didn't have God's law, in some cases he became as one of them. Now he's not saying, Paul isn't saying here anything goes. He's not saying when in Rome, you know, that kind of thing.

[14:28] He isn't talking about becoming a pagan, living like the culture. He is saying that he didn't insist on Jewish customs when he was around Gentiles. Rather, he lived under Christ.

And then to the weak, to those who couldn't eat idle meat without stumbling, he became weak. He stuck to vegetables, stayed away from idle temples in order that they might stumble. Despite his right to do otherwise, Paul chose sacrifice. Think of the level of inconvenience that would have been involved, consistently going without things that he could rightly have for the sake of others.

There isn't much be true to yourself in that, is there? It is very challenging, and that is precisely the point. Paul isn't talking about himself here to make himself look good. He is explaining the way he lives that we might follow his example. Now often these verses, you've perhaps heard sermons on contextualization, sermons on evangelistic adaptability, sermons on mission from that little passage to the Jew, I became like the Jew, and all of that. Many times you could have heard great sermons on those things. And these verses are often used by Christians to legitimize their preferences, becoming like the group that you admire and you'd quite like to belong to, and saying, I'm doing it for the gospel, becoming an ex in order to win the ex. But what Paul is describing is completely the opposite. He's describing that which is inconvenient and sacrificial. He's becoming like those that he doesn't want to be like in order to reach them with the gospel. And he does this because in operating that way, he is imitating the Lord Jesus. Paul becomes like others in order that they might

find salvation. Well, isn't that exactly what Christ did for us? He had all the rights of the Son of God, the one through whom the world came into being. He belongs in glory. He does not need to condescend to us. He was within his rights to stay there. But even though he was in very nature God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be held on to. Instead, he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.

The King of glory came that infinite distance to take on flesh. And it wasn't just that he took on flesh, but he kept going. You remember, he washed the feet of his disciples as a servant, as a slave, the one who belonged in the perfection and beauty and majesty and glory of the triune communion in heaven, condescended to the lowest place. In fact, it wasn't just washing the feet of the disciples, was it? Because that wasn't far enough. He even gave up his right to life.

He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death. And not just death, he went again, the most humiliating death, the death by crucifixion, death on a cross. He did this in order to bring us salvation. Jesus was free not to do any of this, but he did it for you and me.

[18 : 22] One theologian says, not only did Paul imitate the Lord, he imitated the Lord in the freedom he had not to do it. That's the thing. We are free to enjoy the good things that God has given, but there is a deeper good than the good of our freedoms. Paul understood this.

He understood the fundamental principle that God has established that you gain life by giving it away. It is more blessed to give than to receive. You gain freedom by giving it up. It's the paradox of the Christian life, a world where the way to win is to come last. Do you believe this?

Do you believe that actually sacrificing for others, actually walking the way of the cross is the actual path to actual life? Paul has learned to see his life as a seed, something to be planted in the ground for a harvest later on. Will you make the same investment?

You know, I will think about it in your family. Husbands, you have the right to respect from your wife. Wives, you have the right to sacrificial love from your husband. When you don't get these things because your spouse isn't perfect, will you overlook that for the sake of your marriage and the good of your children, or will you stand on your rights? Husbands, will you sacrifice to put time and energy into nurturing your wife towards greater maturity in the faith? The delayed harvest image here is most clearly seen when it comes to children, making sacrifices now for the sake of a good outcome in the future with your children. Mothers, sacrificing your career in order to raise godly offspring.

Seeing motherhood as the promotion that it is. Fathers, sacrificing time and convenience and giving up your right to comfort and quiet after a busy day to engage your children, to discipline them, to train them in godliness. My life for yours. What about not just in your family, but your church family?

[20 : 45] Your time, your money, your convenience, your freedoms, your rights. The Lord allows you to have them. He gave them to you as gifts. And by the way, other people can't demand them from you legitimately.

God gives you something, nobody else has the right to demand it from you. You should not feel a shred of guilt about what you have if you've accrued it legitimately.

You didn't sin in order to get it. The question is, will you give them up to invest in the lives of others? Will you give up your spare time and invest it in the lives of younger people, younger Christians who will outlive you in the faith and bring the gospel into a time when you won't be?

Your money could resource training ministers for the future of the IPC. Will you plant your life in the ground of service so that others flourish? Use your home and your hospitality. Will you give yourself to others for their sake, for their flourishing in the Christian life? What about in your wider circle?

Family, church family, in your wider circle. A good question to ask yourself is, where in my life am I going without so that men and women, boys and girls, might hear the gospel? Where am I going without in order to assist the gospel spreading across this community, across this city, and across the world? I want to say I see lots of this across our church.

Sacrifice freely offered for the sake of others and the sake of the gospel. It is great to see. But I want to encourage you to keep going. Keep going. My life for yours. How will we keep going?

[22 : 39] Well, to help us, Paul points us to the athlete. Verse 25, every athlete exercises self-control in all things, saying we're to have an athlete's mindset as we think about this. If we're going to think about this sacrifice, we need to adopt the mindset of an athlete. Not all of us can have an athlete's physical capabilities, but we can have their mindset. Athletes make countless sacrifices.

They discipline their bodies. They go without things that they are free to have. One of the biggest ways you see it with athletes, one of the biggest sacrifices is that they miss important events in people's lives. Weddings, funerals, big birthday celebrations. Sorry, I can't make it. I am training. Why do they do this? They do it in order to win the race and get the medal. That's what Paul says. And that's, he includes this at the end as his motivation.

Here's his motivation. So his rights, his sacrifices, and then his motivation. The reason Paul does all of this is simple. He wants, verse 23, have a look, verse 23, he wants to receive God's blessing. I do it all for the sake of the gospel that I may share with them in its blessings. The blessings in question are the imperishable reward of verse 25, the blessing that God gives to all who put their faith in Jesus Christ. The athlete, they make their sacrifices for a prize that fades, a temporary wreath, medal, just something that in many cases will end up in a drawer. In special cases, it'll be in a frame on the wall somewhere, something like that. The Christian makes their sacrifices for an eternal reward.

Giving up your rights now feels like a ridiculous thing to do. The air that we breathe, the culture that we live in, I'm giving this up, this freedom, I'm passing it up. It sounds like a silly thing to do.

[24 : 37] Why on earth would anyone sacrifice what they have a right to enjoy? Or why would they delay gratification for a moment longer than they should? Here's why. There's something better in the future.

Paul keeps his body under control, verse 27, so that he doesn't miss out on this. The Corinthians should pass up the sacrificial meals so that they don't miss out on this.

And we should be prepared to give up our freedoms for the same reason. Speak to any Olympian between Olympics about the early mornings and the diet and the pain of pushing themselves. And ask them why they bother, and they'll think it's a dumb question.

Why do I bother? Because doing this is how you win. Doing this is how I'm going to get the medal. There is no other way to get the medal other than the sacrifice.

And then ask them after they've won, was the sacrifice worth it? Of course it was. If you insist on your rights to the detriment of a brother or sister, your faith is lost labor.

[25 : 49] Paul says it's beating the air, it's shadow boxing. But if you resist the cultural narrative, and you put people before preferences, and you give up your rights for the sake of others hearing and growing in the gospel, when you stand on the new earth and you see those people there, you will not regret a single sacrifice.

Nobody will get to the end and say, I wish I'd given God a little bit less. A little bit less of their money, a little bit less of their time, a little bit less of them. None of us will stand on the new earth and say, I wish I'd done a bit less.

If we give up our rights for the sake of others hearing and growing in the gospel, we will not regret it on the last day. Take the long view.

Take the long view. And when you ask the question on that day, was it worth it? Well, the question won't even occur to you. Of course it was. Of course it was. Let's pray.