

Liberty and Responsibility: Paul's Example

I Corinthians 9:1-27

We have crossed the half-way point in our study of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Good to take stock of where we are. Turn in your Bible to the book of First Corinthians, chapter one.

Paul founded this church on his second missionary journey. He spent 18 months helping to establish the believers in this major commercial city of Greece. It was strategically located at the heart of a major trade rout. The city was well known for its sexual immorality, worship of a pantheon of gods and goddesses, and its business enterprises.

It was out of this blatant paganism that God had saved men and women, Jews and Greeks, who comprised this small but growing body of believers. These were real people, in real life, in real time.

Paul, now on his third missionary journey, had settled for a time in the city of Ephesus, in present-day Turkey. Two things triggered this letter from Paul back to the believers in Corinth. Firsthand reports reached him about some problems in the church. The second trigger was a letter he received from them asking a number of questions. So, Paul penned this response around A.D. 55 to address these issues.

He opened with identifying them as God's people – **I Corinthians 1:2**

He quickly moved to the first problem. The church was divided into various factions, people aligning themselves with various teachers who had influenced them: Apollos, Peter, and Paul himself. Then there was the "spiritual group" of the party of Christ.

Paul declared that this ought not to be so. The true focus of his ministry was the cross of Christ. This was his message, his mission.

I Corinthians 1:17. He repeats this in **2:1-5**

He admonished those who were puffed up in their own wisdom, a wisdom of this world. He explained that the wisdom of man is foolishness to God just as the wisdom of God is foolishness to man.

The cross, viewed by man as weakness and foolishness, was in reality strength and wisdom. But this wisdom of God was available only to those who were enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

In chapter three, Paul talked about his ministry and how God was responsible for bringing about spiritual growth. He cautioned those who considered themselves to be wise to instead become as fools, fools in the world's eyes that they might be wise in God.

Then Paul presented the proper way that he should be viewed by the Corinthians – **I Corinthians 4:1**. He went on in the chapter to describe what he had suffered for the sake of Christ, the price he had paid for his ministry.

In chapter five he returned to another problem that had been reported to him: that of a church member who was living in a sexual relationship with his father's wife – his stepmother. The church prided itself in being tolerant, unwilling to discipline for this open, public sin – sin which was destroying the witness of the church and defaming the name of God. The sinning brother might have been one of the financial patrons of the church whom nobody would want to upset.

Another problem is dealt with in chapter six: a member of the church suing another member in the secular court. Look at Paul's question to them – **I Corinthians 6:2**.

When we arrive at the middle of chapter six, Paul address an issue which brought to light the way believers viewed the Greek perspective of the physical body. Some believed the body was irrelevant and unrelated to the soul, and thus did not matter to God. You could, therefore, do anything you wanted with the body. In the sexual area, it led to sexual immorality even among believers in the church. Paul countered that the body did matter; it will be raised in the next life – a subject he will deal with in depth in chapter 15.

And so he made this grand statement about the believer's body – **6:19-20**.

The opposite view was asceticism – a perspective that led one to deny and suppress the desires, needs and pleasures of the body. There were some in the church who were even saying that married couples should refrain from sexual relations. Paul is asked about this in the letter he received from them.

He gave this amazing teaching on the importance of the sexual relationship in marriage: sex should be a regular part of marriage. And he further encourages those who are married to remain married. There is this wonderful instruction on sexual equality in marriage – each spouse authority over the other's body and should seek to please the other.

Paul also addressed the single person and said that if God has given them the gift of self-control, they should remain single. I think Paul really believed that Jesus was going to return soon. And a single person, without marital responsibilities, would be able to be more effective and focused in ministry than a married person.

When we arrived, then, at chapter eight last week, we see Paul beginning a lengthy section that goes all the way through chapter 11, verse 1. It deals with the problem of idolatry. Remember, these folks are living in a culture that is immersed in idol worship – a buffet of gods and goddesses.

One of the vexing questions facing these believers was this: “Is it permissible or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols?” Whether in the temple restaurant itself as part of social interaction or eating such meat purchased in the market, it was an issue dividing the church.

More mature believers, at the risk of being puffed up – vain and arrogant – in the estimation of their maturity, held to the principle of “liberty.” “All things are lawful for me” was their cry.

But in exercising their liberty, it put some Christians who were newer and less mature in faith at risk of seeing the actions of their fellow believers and then violating their consciences by eating meat and perhaps even falling back into idolatry. Therefore, Paul appeals to the law of love. Though they would not violate their own conscience in eating meat sacrificed to idols, they should choose the greater good of their brothers and sisters by refraining from their exercise of liberty. Responsibility was to be considered – for the welfare of others.

Paul concluded chapter six with this – **Verse 13**.

When we come to chapter nine, we have to see how this fits within the whole section. Paul will return directly to the subject of idolatry in chapter ten. But here he presents his life and ministry as an example of what he is calling his fellow Christians to do. He has been dealing with those who asserted their rights, even if it was detrimental to the faith of fellow believers.

Paul will explain how he had set aside his rights for the common good. This is about his rights as an apostle, in particular, his right to be compensated by the church for his ministry to them. The chapter begins with five arguments why this was his right. Look at chapter nine.

The first argument is the example of other apostles – **9:1-6**.

As an apostle, one who was an eyewitness of the resurrected Jesus, he had the rights as all the other did. This included financial compensation.

The second argument is the example from other human endeavors – **Verse 7**.

It is a matter of common human experience that the laborer should reap the benefits of his labor.

The third argument was from the Old Testament law – **9:8-12**.

The ox trampled the sheaves of wheat to shake out the grain from the hull. Yet the ox was not muzzled so that it might eat of what was shaken out. Paul makes the point that he has “sowed spiritual things” and, thus, it was appropriate for him to “reap material things” from them.

Others do it, so why shouldn't Paul? This issue becomes even more acute in his second letter where he has to defend himself against those who wanted to dismiss his apostleship because he did not take money like others who ministered to the Corinthians, sometimes only for the money. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Paul chose not to insist on his right to expect this. He was concerned that it might hinder the work of the Gospel of Christ.

His fourth argument was the example of the temple priests – **Verse 13**.

The priest serving in the temple received portions of the sacrifices. This is the way they were supported in their ministry on behalf of the people.

Finally, he demonstrates his right by the Lord's command – **Verse 14**.

I guess this is why you pay me! Paul says I have every right, and by every example, to expect that you would pay me. Instead, Paul has been working in his trade as a tent-maker to support himself. This was viewed as the work of a laborer, someone low down on the social ladder.

This might be one of the reasons why some doubted his apostolic credentials since he should not have to have worked to support himself. Others did not; he shouldn't have. But, he did – that's the point.

Paul goes on to give three reasons for setting aside his rights. The first reason was to give the Gospel freely. **I Corinthians 9:15-18**.

Perhaps Paul was afraid of the strings that might have come attached to such compensation. This is one of the potential dangers in ministry – that those who provide the money overly influence the one doing the ministry. Stories abound of pastors who dare not speak the truth if it would alienate and offend the big givers in the congregation. Ministry is held captive to those who provide the funds.

Paul says that he would rather not receive money lest others perceive that the Gospel is for sale.

The second reason was that he might win as many to Christ as possible. Look at **Verses 19-23**.

This is such an amazing thing – Paul, who was a free man, a Roman citizen by birth, who chose to be a slave to everyone. But, Leon Morris writes:

This does not, of course, mean that his conduct was unprincipled. On occasion his principles led him to follow courses of action in the teeth of strong opposition. But where no principle was at stake he was prepared to go to extreme lengths to meet people.

M.D. Hooker shows the parallel to the work of Christ on our behalf. He says:

Christ became what we are, he was made what we are, he was sent into our condition, *in order that we might become what he is*. Paul, in turn, became what the men and women to whom he was proclaiming the Gospel were, in order that he might gain them for the Gospel. And just as some of the statements about what Christ became needed modification – he became sin, *though he knew no sin*, and he came *in the likeness of sinful flesh*, where the word “likeness” prevents us thinking of him as sinful – so too, in the case of Paul. He came under the law, *even though he was not under the law*; he became as one without the law, *even though he was not without God’s law*.

The third reason why Paul laid aside his rights was that he might run in the way to receive God’s reward – **Verses 24-27**.

This would have resonated with his readers in Corinth. The Isthmian Games were second only to the Olympic Games. They were held every two years and Paul uses the pursuit of winning the prize as an example of how he disciplined his life.

A literal rendering of verse 25 in the Greek text is: “And everyone struggling in all things exercises self-control.” The word “struggling” is *agonizomai*. Guess what English words come from this: agony and agonize. Paul isn’t describing a half-hearted effort here. This is real work, real discipline, strict training.

And all that the winner received was, at first, a pine wreath; later celery was used. This didn’t last long; pretty soon it would be worthless. But Paul says that the reward given to those who win is an imperishable wreath.

Paul was concerned that he might be disqualified. Now, is he talking about losing his salvation? Only if he contradicts himself in his many teachings on the security of his future destiny. He was afraid that was that he would suffer loss by failing to please the One who had called him to ministry.

This passage fits within the context of Paul urging the Corinthian believers to set aside their rights of liberty for the sake of others and to exercise their responsibility to consider the welfare of other believers. It takes real effort to deny one's right for the sake of others.

David Garland summarizes the chapter this way:

At great cost to himself, [Paul] renounces his legitimate and irrefutable right to eat and drink at the expense of the community, and he does so to avoid anything that may deter others from accepting the gospel. The Corinthians should follow their apostle's example and renounce their presumed right to consume idol food, which Paul regards as illegitimate and injurious, in order to avoid causing a weak brother to stumble back into idolatry. Paul's not "eating" (partaking) what the community could and should supply him as its apostle is going above and beyond the call of duty. The Corinthians' not eating idol food is simply obeying their duty as Christians.

The point of this chapter, I believe, is the same in principle. We need to ask ourselves if what we are doing, or how we are living, is an obstacle to those who are fellow believers or to those whom we seek to introduce to Christ. As Paul says elsewhere, "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable."

Last week we listed many of the gray areas of Christian conduct. We weren't talking about things that are clearly right or wrong, but those that have the potential to lead to excess and to sin. Will my involvement in those things cause some brother or sister weaker in faith to violate their consciences to participate in the same things? Will my actions put an obstacle in the way of those I seek to demonstrate God's love and grace? Love trumps liberty!