

WHAT ABOUT MY RIGHTS?

1 Corinthians 9

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We're looking at the theme "What about my rights?" We're living in an era of demand for rights. Such a demand can be right or it can be a very negative aspect. Demand for rights can be positive if they address injustice. I don't think any of us want to go back to a time in America where negroes were forced to sit in the back of the bus. I don't want to go back to the time when in my wife's little hometown in Alabama, in a Laundromat across from Greyhound bus station—an all white Laundromat—one evening, while Jewel's dad was in the Laundromat, a rainy, cold, stormy night, a black man and his boy came in out of the cold to sit in the Laundromat, while waiting for a bus, and were evicted because they were black. There's been a positive dimension to the civil rights movement in this country. None of us want to go back to the days before there were civil rights.

But there are negative dimensions, as well, to demands for rights. A demand for rights, if such a right would negate the moral law of God, is not a good thing at all. The abortion rights movement, the homosexual rights movement, because they negate the moral law of God, are bad demands for rights. And a demand for rights, if the acquisition of those rights ends up destroying the society, also is bad, even if the rights themselves may be good. Solzhenitsyn, for example, the Russian exile now in America, warns about the quest in America for legal rights which are divorced from the true spirit of justice. When everyone becomes lawsuit happy and loses the spirit of justice, the country collapses. That has been a prophetic warning that Solzhenitsyn has given America, that in the quest for the letter of the law, we may have missed the spirit of the law.

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Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9, is dealing with the theme of Christian rights. He has begun to deal with that in 1 Corinthians 8. We looked at it last week under the title of “Social Drinking, Dancing, Movies and Other Sins.” For Paul, the issue was whether or not to eat meat offered to idols. Paul, in that chapter, moves beyond the Jerusalem council decision of Acts 15, which had given the specific directives that Christians shouldn’t eat meat offered to idols. That decision was evidently temporary in nature. It was meant, at the time it was given, to foster table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. But now, Paul’s moving beyond that council decision, saying it only had a temporary impact. In true reality, there’s nothing wrong with eating meat offered to idols, unless it wounds or grieves a brother, or unless it violates your conscience. He limits, though, the right to eat meat offered to idols by whether or not the exercise of that right will lead to another person’s ruin or destruction.

Some at Corinth are still going to be objecting to Paul’s line of reasoning in 1 Corinthians 8 and say, “I’m not going to give up my rights. The weaker brother needs to grow up. He has to learn to accept responsibility for himself. He’ll never learn if I keep yielding to him (or her).” And there’s a certain amount of truth in that. Sometimes, the correct course of action is to help a believer mature in an area where they’re immature. But truth without love always becomes a very, very cold thing. If God had wanted us just to have truth, He could have dropped a book down from heaven on us. But the fact that He wanted us to know truth with love is evidenced by the fact that He gave Jesus to us, who gave up a lot of rights, as the eternal Son of God, to come and live among us as a poor person. Jesus won us, not so much with truth, but He won us with love. A love which was undergirded by truth.

So Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9, even though he’s talking about paying the preacher, he’s actually dealing with the question of eating meat offered to idols. He’s going to demonstrate, out of his

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own personal life, the example of “I have right to give up my right.” He will use another example in 1 Corinthians 10 that we’ll look at later, the negative example of Israel, which tries to assume rights and winds up in a lot of trouble for it.

I. The first thing he does, in verses 1–2, is assert his freedom and his apostleship.

“Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have not I seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 9:1–2, NIV).

“Assertion” is a big word today. There’s a lot of books about asserting yourself. And there is a legitimate way in which, from time to time, we need to stand up for ourselves. Paul is doing that here. He’s being pushed around a great deal by the Corinthian congregation. That is not a good thing, because they are spurning his authority by demeaning his position. There are some people at Corinth evidently saying, “Paul really isn’t an apostle after all, because all the other apostles accept payment for their ministry. But remember that when Paul was here, he didn’t accept payment at all? Therefore, he must not really be an apostle.” Paul is countering that by asserting that indeed he is an apostle. And he’s a free person. “Am I not free? Can I not eat meat offered to idols? Can I not do as I will as an apostle of Jesus Christ? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen the Lord?” What’s involved in being an apostle is being commissioned by the Lord. To eyewitness Him. Paul saw Him on the road to Damascus. And Paul says, “If you doubt all these things, don’t you recognize that the mark of the authenticity of my apostleship is you? You are my seal” (see 1 Corinthians 9:2).

The word “seal” in biblical days has a lot more importance than it does today. If you had a shipment, for example, of figs or dates or any other kind of commodity, it would be put in cases or bags. Then a seal would be affixed to it that case or bag. Which, if in transit, the seal would be

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broken, then the recipient of the product could refuse it, because its contents had been tampered with.

When you wrote a will in those times, in the first century—a will in Greek life was sealed with seven seals. As an heir, if you presented that will and any one of the seals were broken, the will was invalid. Because the seal was the mark of authenticity, the mark of ownership. Paul says, “If in other places they doubt my apostleship, surely not here, your lives, the fact that you have turned to God from idols and serve the true living God and wait for Jesus Christ from heaven, the fact that you have done this is an assertion to my authority as apostle of Jesus Christ. One who plants the church of the living God.”

The lesson—I think, between the lines here—is to read, maybe, the disappointment in Paul’s heart. Here are people whom he had really loved and labored for, who are ungrateful toward what he has done. I think one of the lessons which we must always learn in the body of Christ, whether we are paid for the ministry or we volunteer in the ministry in the body of Christ, is that there are occasions where there may be ingratitude from someone or some group of persons whom we have really loved and labored for.

The non-Christian reaction would be, when there is ingratitude, “Write those people off! If that’s how they treat me, after all I’ve done for them, just forget it.” But love never lets anyone go.

Love never writes people off. Even though Paul has been challenged and they are a seal to his apostleship, he’s not going to adopt an attitude toward them of “phooey with you!” In the body of Christ we can never, ever afford to say that to another believer. Love doesn’t let go.

So Paul starts out by asserting his freedom and apostleship. Then he goes on to assert the rights he possessed as an apostle. “This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. Don't we have the right to food and drink? Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us,

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as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?" (1 Corinthians 9:3–6, NIV). He says that basically he has three rights as an apostle. One is the right to food and drink, which I would understand to be the right to be entertained or to have hospitality given to him as an apostle of the Lord. He also indicates that he has the right to travel with a believing wife at the expense of the church, as was the habit of the other apostles, including Peter and including the Lord's brothers. There are some, interestingly enough, who hold the view that the early apostles, the majority of them, didn't marry. But Paul, here, is saying that's not the case at all. The single life was the exception to the rule among the apostles, rather than the rule. Even Peter was married. He did have a wife. He was not a single person and his believing wife traveled with him. So did the Lord's brothers—James and Jude—and the others. Paul says, "Do I not have a right to this? To have a wife travel with me at the church's expense?" Of course, we know Paul was single.

He says, in verse 6, "Do I have a right not to work?" By this right not to work, he means a right not to engage in physical labor. We know that he was a tent maker, for example. Do I not have the right to be supported by you rather than "working for a living"? There is a common fallacy, that those who are engaged in a ministry of the gospel in the body in a paid position don't work. They kind of show up on Sunday morning, but what do they do the rest of the week?

Paul is not saying here that the "minister" is entitled not to work at all, to just show up and put in an appearance. But he means secular employment.

What is the basis for that right? Verses 7–14 talk about the basis for the right. "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk?" (1 Corinthians 9:7, NIV). He uses, first of all, examples from human nature. He's saying that's the case with any profession, that a person is paid of the

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benefit that is gained in that profession. A soldier doesn't support himself. We're having enough problems registering for the draft in this country without telling people who would get drafted or would enlist, "You're responsible for your own pay while you're in the military. Have your parents sent your food to you?" We'd have a few problems, probably, with that. He's saying that the vineyard owner or laborer is entitled to eat from the vineyard. The goat shepherd is entitled to drink of the milk of the goat herd. Just commonsense tells us that what a person works by, he ought to be benefited by.

But he says, "Do I say this merely from a human point of view? [Or, "I don't want to just give a human analogy"]" (1 Corinthians 9:8, NIV). He refers to the law of God as supporting this fact. "Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.' Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:8–12, NIV).

II. Paul says another reason why he should have been supported as an apostle—he is essentially saying that in the Old Testament you'll find Deuteronomy 25:4 talks about not muzzling the ox that treads out the grain.

There are people, by the way, that say there should never be any paid positions in the church. Of course, Paul is laying that viewpoint to rest here.

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What in the world does this have to do with payment of persons in the ministry? Are you comparing ministers to an ox? Yes, Paul is comparing preachers to oxen. He's saying that, in the Old Testament, there was kind of an animal protection society code that said that when you strap up an ox to a wheel device and it walks around and treads out the grain, separates the chaff from the grain, it has a right to be unmuzzled, to lap up the grain that is there. It shouldn't be tantalized by treading out grain and not have the chance to take some of it for itself. Paul's saying that was not written for oxen. It was written for the ministry as well. This should not be taken as an excuse for extravagant salaries. In other words, the ox doesn't eat up all the grain he treads out. There are some pretenders in the ministry who attempt to lap up all the grain and should be so noted.

III. Paul gives a third reason why he possesses the right.

Verse 13 says, "Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar?" (NIV). He's saying the Old Testament practice of the Levites, the priests, was that they gained their support from the offerings of the people.

Finally, he says if anyone doubts that this is a right, then let them look at the Lord himself. Verse 14 says, "In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (NIV). Here Paul is referring back to Luke 10:7 where Jesus sends out the seventy and says the laborer is worthy of his wages.

I would give a warning here to younger persons preparing for professions in the ministry such as missionary service, pastoring or staff or the like. The scriptural emphasis is upon the fact that you minister and then you are paid. It is not upon the idea that you are paid and then you minister. There's a subtle difference between the two. But I found some false ideas that ministry

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starts when you get hired somewhere. Then when you're hired, you start working. Nothing could be further from that in the New Testament. You work and then you are paid.

Paul asserts the right. Then he turns right around in verses 15–18 and says, “I have the right to give up the right.” Isn't that great in an era in which there is so much demand for rights? Isn't that the counterbalance? I have the right but I have the right to give up the right. In verses 15–18 Paul speaks of this. “But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it” (1 Corinthians 9:15–18, NIV).

After Paul had asserted his rights to be paid as an apostle, maybe some of the Corinthians were worrying that they were going to get a past due bill for two and a half years of ministry among them. So Paul laid that to rest right away. “I'm not worried. I'm not laying down these rights in order to get paid, and I wouldn't accept payment from you anyway because that would deprive me from being able to boast all over the world that I didn't take pay at Corinth.” It's sort of a gentle irony that Paul uses on this very proud and vain Corinthian church. To remind them, in the midst of all their pride and self-sufficiency, that he has a point of pride too. That this great church was established as a free gift of the apostle.

I don't think there is a true minister of the Lord anywhere who wishes that he were not in the same position as Paul, to be able to say with Paul, “I was able to give my services free.” I realize that as a person who does receive the benefit of the right that Paul indicates here—that there may

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always be among some the subtle feeling that you're doing what you're doing because you're paid to do it. Nothing in my own heart could be further from the truth. It may that be some people in the world may think this on occasion.

Paul is concerned here, not about the issue of preaching versus not preaching. He says, "That's not the issue." He says, "Compulsion is laid upon me to preach. I have no choice in the matter. If I preach or if I don't preach, there is no choice. That's my responsibility. But I do have a choice of preaching with pay or preaching without pay. While it's my right to be paid, it's my right to preach without pay."

Then he, in verses 19–23, gives an affirmation of how consistently he has used the example of giving up his rights. He is encouraging the Corinthians in the context of meat offered to idols. He said, "You Corinthians need to give up your rights." He's saying, in light of this context, I present to you this positive, consistent example. "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law, I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Corinthians 9:19-23, NIV).

Basically, Paul is saying his consistent pattern in life had been to yield his rights. He had a predictable Christlike behavior. He knew what his goal was. It was to bring other men and women to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Self was not on the throne of his life. Jesus was on the throne of his life, and he could respond accordingly. He is free enough to be lord of all but

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he is slave enough to be subject to all. Martin Luther said beautifully of 1 Corinthians 9:19, in his little book on Christian liberty, “The Christian person is the most free. Lord of all and subject to none. A Christian person is the most dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone. Lord of all, servant of all.”

Paul, in this passage, avoids the pitfalls of dogmatism and compromise. He says there are times when you adapt your strategy in order to win a person to the Lord Jesus. It’s not being inconsistent, but it’s taking into account the other person’s needs.

Let me give a living illustration of this. For example, in respect to reaching young people for the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are some persons who falsely believe the only kind of music to listen to is something from the past, the gospel hymns of the past. Yet there have been others who’ve said, “Let’s tune in to the cultural wave the kids are on. Not compromising the gospel but, in a sense, learning to appeal to them in the music language through which the gospel can be communicated.”

That’s the kind of principle that Paul’s talking about here: To the weak, I became weak, to the strong, I became strong. To those under the law, I became as one under the law. To those without the law, I became as without the law, so that I might win some. Methods change, the gospel doesn’t.

Paul then gives application of how diligently we ought to pursue this matter of giving up of ourselves for the goal that is set before us. The application, which he gives, is in verses 24–27: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my

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body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (NIV).

Every three years at Corinth, the Isthmian games were held. These, in the first century world, were second only to the Olympic games. The Olympic games were the greatest, the most largely attended. Paul is referring to these here. He identifies, in the illustration, three things related to their practical life. He says he heads for a goal, he disciplines himself for the goal and he plans to finish and gain the goal. Off of that, we then can ask of ourselves certain kinds of questions. What are we really living for? What is the finish line? Paul uses the illustration of the runner and the boxer. He says of the runner, in verse 26, “I do not run like man, running aimlessly.” Picture yourself in a race. Can you imagine lining up at the starting line, the gun goes off and you don’t know where you’re supposed to go? No! You know where the goal is and you’ve got one thing on your mind—to get to the goal line and beat everybody else.

Paul says, what about the boxer? The boxer doesn’t just beat the air, but he hits the real opponent in the game. So the Christian life ought to be lived with a sense of knowing the direction that you’re going in. We begin to get this direction when we come to Jesus Christ. If you’re here today without Jesus Christ in your life, you’re basically running in circles because you have no direction and you have nothing in your life that’s going to count for eternity. You are in the world without hope, because you’re in the world without God. The beginning of getting that direction is to give your life to Jesus Christ, to open up and receive Him.

Once that has been done, the second question we ought to address next of ourselves is: What is God going to be pleased to do in my life? What is going to count in my life for eternity? What are the values that are going to last beyond this life? This life is passing away. What is really going to count into the ages? Can I give myself? Can I set that as a goal? That when all is said

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and done, I want such and such to happen. It's a sense of having a goal line in your life, knowing what God has called you to do, and pursuing it.

Someone once drew a cartoon of two men on Mars, looking down on people in this world who were scurrying here and there and everywhere. One of the men on Mars said to the other, "What are they doing down there?" The other replied, "They're going." "But where are they going?" "They're not going anywhere, they're just going."

In contrast to that, General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was invited to Buckingham Palace to meet the king near the end of his life. King Edward VII asked General Booth to write in his autograph album. General Booth wrote in King Edward's album these words, "Your majesty, some men's ambition is art. Some men's ambition is fame. Some men's ambition is gold. My ambition is the souls of men." That was his bottom line. That was his goal line. He gave everything toward it and he got it. That's basically what Paul is saying here, by way of practical application. So strong is this matter of becoming all things to all men, of yielding rights where it would hurt someone, of pressing toward the goal, that it becomes the supreme thing, reaching the goal and not getting stuck somewhere in between on some secondary issue.

What is necessary if you're going to reach a goal? Discipline is going to be required. So Paul talks about the runner under strict training. The boxer as well, under strict training, not just beating the air. There are many persons who have great athletic potential, but never develop that athletic potential because there is no discipline in their life. Many great students have great potential as a student but, because of the lack of discipline, do not develop that potential. I think that's one of the saddest things a teacher faces.

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Any rigorous training ought to be accompanied by encouragement. No half-hearted effort is a winning achievement. The strenuous self-denial of the athlete in training for his fleeting reward, the laurel wreath or the gold medal, is a rebuke to all half-hearted and flabby Christian service. The athlete denies himself many legitimate things. That's Paul's point, denial of many legitimate things in pursuit of his goal.

You say, "I have no discipline in my life as a Christian. I'm going to get on a crash discipline course." Don't do that. You'll find that a crash discipline course in the Christian life works just about as poorly as the crash diet. You may take off a few pounds, but it won't last. It's got to be a fundamental alteration of life. Start small and build up. The Christian life simply cannot be lived without discipline. Discipline doesn't save us. It doesn't bear upon the fact that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law and we're declared righteous because of Him. That's a free gift. If we're going to live the Christian life effectively and serve the body of Christ, then we're going to have to go through discipline. That's exciting, but there is pain to it.

The last thing that Paul mentions, in verse 27, is the fact that anybody who trains and has a goal wants to finish. Paul says he does not want to become disqualified. The word that Paul uses is "something that doesn't pass a test." Paul's worried about being cast away. He's not worried about losing his salvation. This passage doesn't deal with salvation. It's a passage dealing with Christian service. He's afraid that, after all has come and gone, at this point in his life he might abandon his principles and become useless from here on in his Christian life and ministry. He doesn't want that to happen. Paul did not fear the things that most of us fear. He did not seem to fear sickness or suffering. He certainly didn't fear persecution. He didn't fear death. But he did fear the possibility of failing to fulfill the task that God had given to him. That was his greatest

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fear. Because of that fear and because of the love of God which constrained him, he strove to reach the goal, which had been set before him.

All of us do have a goal. Or we should, if we don't. If we have a goal, it's going to require strict training to reach that goal. Southern Californians, like all Christians all over the world, are great on the start and poor on the finish. There needs to be more finishing of what we begin and more care in prayer, lest we begin stuff we're not called to do and then drop out. But discipline, and then arriving at the finish line.

Closing Prayer

We see, Lord, one symbol in the heavens, the image of the finish line. That moment when we come face to face with You and You inquire about us concerning our life. That moment when, at the finish line, You say to us, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. You've been faithful over a little. You will now be faithful over much" (Matthew 25:21). Lord, if there are persons here today in this service who do not know You personally, may they, in these moments, open their own life to You, so that the endless circling in their life may be over and their true new direction may now be established in their hearts. Grant this, I pray, Lord. Receiving You is so simple, as where we are, simply inviting You into our life. I pray that this action will take place, even as we're praying now. Your Spirit is here to bear witness to Jesus. I pray, too, Lord, for Christians in this body who are struggling with an area of rights. Maybe a legitimate demand for a right in a family, where we feel, as a parent or a child or a wife or husband, that we have a certain right to something. You're confronting us today with this message, with a new idea that we have a right to give up the right. Only Your Spirit can direct us to know whether we should insist on the right or insist on the right to give up the right. Lord, grant revelation by Your Spirit, to see a new direction and opportunity for us as free men and women in You. Whether there's

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pain in Your body, with people relating to one another, with some not responding in a way that others would have felt comfortable about, that we have in You the right to be free, to always go on serving and giving and loving and believing in people, even when that is not reciprocated back to us. Grant, Lord, that we may truly grow in You, grow in grace. Realizing that the rewards of this world are like the laurel wreath that is on the Olympic winner of those times, that at the end of the race, all that the runner had worked for is simply something that perished. A little wreath on his or her head that passed away rather quickly. All that time, all that discipline, all that energy, all those years of work, for a fading crown. For a gold medal that will perish with this world. How much more, then, Lord, can we take encouragement, since we run in a race in which rewards have a far more important stake and are far greater in dimension, the reward that we strive for in our Christian service is a reward that is eternal and does not pass away, it abides forever in the heavens. We thank You for the prospect that awaits us as Your people. We can, therefore, somehow adjust to and adapt to and respond to the great crises of life, as well, because we know we are hastening on to meet You, that the moment of our appearance before You and Your appearance before us is always at hand. Help us to strive and to be faithful. In Your name. Amen.