

Rights or Wrongs

1 Corinthians 9:1-23

In Chapter 9 of First Corinthians, the Apostle Paul is still answering the question that the Corinthians had asked him, "Is it right to eat meat that has been sacrificed to an idol?" Although none of us would have asked that question of Paul, behind it is the greater question that we most certainly would have asked him, and that is, "How far should we go to adjust to the conscientious scruples of other people?"

In this chapter Paul uses himself as an example of someone who has made that adjustment. In verses 1 and 2 he writes:

"Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? ² If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostle-ship in the Lord."

There were some in the Corinthian Church who were maintaining that because they had superior knowledge they could use that knowledge to exercise their freedom over those in the Corinthian Church who had less knowledge. This was the topic addressed in chapter 8. Paul is saying to them that for those being shaped by the Spirit you can't live this way. By using himself as an example he is saying that if knowledge is the ground of defending and demanding their rights then he has an even greater basis for it than they did. If they had knowledge, how much more did he who was an apostle, a chosen spokesman of the Lord Jesus?

Not only that, these Christians in Corinth owed their very existence as a church to him and his apostle-ship. He is saying, "If I am an apostle, and I have this knowledge that is greater than yours nevertheless I do not exercise all my rights. You object to giving up some rights for the sake of others. Well, I want you to know that is what I have been doing for you for a long time." This is his argument, and beginning with Verse 3 and on through Verse 23 we have his commentary on that.

He begins by outlining the rights he really did possess:

"This is my defense to those who would examine me. ⁴ Do we not have the right to our food and drink? ⁵ Do we not have the right to be accompanied by 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?"

Here Paul lays out very clearly the biblical justification for ordained ministers being supported in full-time pastoral ministry. He says, "We have the right to have food and drink supplied to us in our ministry -- a right to eat and to have everything we need materially furnished to us." Further, he says, "We have the right to marry just like Peter and some of the other apostles, and even the brothers of the Lord himself did." Third, Paul says, "We have a right not to have to work for our living."

Paul, of course, does not mean that there is no work involved in the ministry. He is talking about having to do work other than the work of being an apostle or in our case, my being your priest, in order to earn a living. He then proceeds to give us the basis for that right in verses 7-12.

"Who at any time pays the expenses for doing military service? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk?"

He says no one ever labors in these three occupations and does not reap as a result and is supported by his efforts. A soldier is a good case in point, he says. Soldiers do not earn a living working at a trade, or a craft, or a profession, but they are supported nevertheless.

So says Paul, not only custom supports what I am saying here, but second, the Law of Moses says the same (Verse 8):

"Do I say this on human authority? Does not the law also say the same? ⁹ For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned?"

Is that why God said that through Moses? Yes, it was originally. God is concerned about oxen. He does not want animals abused, beaten, and mistreated, and that is why he said it in the first place. But Paul argues:

"Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake, for whoever plows should plow in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of

a share in the crop."

What Paul says is, "God said this in the beginning because of his concern for oxen, but he wrote it down for our sakes and passed it on through the Scripture because, by means of it, he wants to teach us the same principle."

Paul then goes on to argue at verse 11:

"If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits?"

This becomes, then, a principle that ought to be universally recognized. When you are blessed and helped by someone, simple gratitude would dictate that you do something in return to show your gratitude. That is what Paul is arguing here. If you have been blessed and helped in your spiritual life, and your family changed and your whole life enriched, how much more, Paul says, should you not therefore support with material benefits those who helped you in this way? Paul adds one final support for this 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 what is sacrificed on the altar?"

He is referring, of course, to the care of the Levites in the Old Testament days when the sacrifices were divided up among them. They actually ate of the meat and they used the wine and the oil that was brought there. Now Paul says at verse 14

"In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel."

Paul has presented very clearly here the reason in supporting the principle of financial remuneration for those engaged in full-time pastoral ministry. The apostle argues that the Lord himself has commanded that this is the principle by which apostolic/ pastoral ministry should be exercised.

But now Paul comes to his point. All this has just been building up to what he has been wanting to say. He proves that he had the right to be supported, but he did not

always exercise that. When he came to Corinth he had deliberately chosen not to. Look at Verse 15:

"But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case. Indeed, I would rather die than that-no one will deprive me of my ground for boasting!"

He feels very strongly about this. He says to these people, "Look, I would rather die than have you take away my right to give up my rights. That is a right I insist on having." The right to give up his rights, that is the greatest right a Christian has. Paul says, "This means everything to me." "Well," you say, "why did he feel so strongly about it?" His answer is in Verses 16-18:

"If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim 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 entrusted with a commission."

What the apostle is saying, basically, is, there is no sense of pride and achievement that came to him because he faithfully preached the gospel. No, on the contrary, he says he really has no choice about preaching the gospel, "obligation is laid upon me." In other words, "If I do not preach I am perfectly miserable. I have really no choice in this matter. I would much rather preach than experience what I know I am going to experience if I do not: the lash of my conscience, the sense of failure in what God has appointed me to do. I cannot live with that. But this, he says, is not the reason why he does it without charge, why he earns his own living making tents. What is the reason? He tells us in Verse 18:

"What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel."

What Paul is saying is simply that the thing that motivated him was the sheer delight it gave him to bless and enrich someone else without taking a penny in return. It was the joy of giving that Paul was experiencing. What form did this take in a practical way? Well, he goes on to describe it. Here we have this famous passage about his relationship to people of different ethnic backgrounds.

"For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I

might win more of them."

"I am free," he says, "I am an apostle. I have knowledge beyond anything you have. But that does not mean that I demand my rights. No, I am glad to give them up, freely, willingly, that I might win the more."

"To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews"

He was willing to go back under the old restrictions that he had been brought up in, all the old limitations of ritual and ceremony and outlook, in order to move back in alongside his Jewish brethren and be understood by them. He was willing to live again as a Jew when he was with them.

"To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law."

To those who were still under dietary restrictions and various limitations on their activity, Paul says he was willing to do the same, though, he says, he was not himself under the law. To those outside the law (that is non-Jews) I became as one outside the law.

"When I was with them I ate their food, even food offered to idols. It did not bother me. I did not feel any restrictions, because I was trying to reach these people." Then, lest they misunderstand the implications of being outside the law, he adds,

"though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law."

What is this Law. It is the Law of love, the law of freedom. So never lawless, nevertheless he became as outside the law with those who lived that way in order that he might win them to Christ.

"To the weak I became weak."

He adjusted to the conscientious scruples of those who did not yet have liberty to do some of the things that he felt free to do. What a picture! What an example!

"I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some. "

That is the great verse in which the apostle declares this spirit of selfless accommodation to where people are. That is what ought to characterize the Christian approach. We should be willing to set aside our own personal desires in order that we might win a hearing and open a door for a witness about the Lord. He never denied principle, never compromised in the realm of immorality, but nevertheless adjusted to the outlook of those with whom he was. Then once again you get the reason for it in Verse 23:

"I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."

The gospel -- the good news that God has given to us without any merit on our part. To give it without expecting anything in return, that is the character of the gospel. Paul says he enjoys the exquisite pleasure of giving without thought of return.

There are three applications that we can glean from this passage:

1. Financial support of Christian ministers. Paul makes it abundantly clear that the church ought to provide for the financial needs of those who preach the gospel. At the same time, his own example of renouncing such support from the Corinthians raises a number of interesting possibilities. Is it possible that we have arrived at a moment in the life of the church where salaried ministers have become so domesticated in North America that they are no longer able to preach the gospel effectively? Have we become excessively dependent on those who provide for us. Be it in the case of Anglican priests our wanting to win the favour of our bishop or those others who have authority over us? Anyone's whose vocation is to proclaim the gospel should stop and ask from time to time, "Who is footing the bill for me to do this, and what implications does that have for the content and integrity of my ministry?"

Downward mobility. By emphasizing his identification with "the weak," Paul declares to his Corinthian readers a "preferential option for the poor." Rather than acting like a strong, free, well-educated citizen, Paul understands his vocation to require self-lowering actions; restricting his diet and doing menial labor, implicitly, such choices are for Paul part of what it means to be "under Christ's law" (v. 21); his life responds to and recapitulates the life-pattern of Christ who gave his life for the weak). This sort of downward mobility is not a model for apostles only; all who are in Christ are called to share it. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that 1 Corinthians 9 should speak most powerfully and disturbingly to Christians in situations of ease and

privilege. "What would it mean for us to embrace Paul's determination to do everything for the sake of the gospel? To let that consideration shape all our vocational and economic choices?"

3. *Getting free from "rights."* Perhaps the most striking element of this chapter for Canadian Christians is its studied indifference to the rights of the individual. Without ever denying that he could claim various rights, Paul exemplifies instead a freedom that relinquishes rights for the sake of others (v. 19). True Christian freedom is exercised in service. By contrast, the Corinthians who in exercising their right to do whatever they liked had become really captive to their own self-interest. To put it bluntly 1 Corinthians 9 suggests that if we find ourselves campaigning on the party platform of defending our own rights and privileges we have lost sight of the gospel.

I want to close with these words of C. S. Lewis. I think they are significant, and pertinent to this issue:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be rung, and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and of love is hell.

The apostle is saying that to demand your rights is to condemn yourself to emotional poverty, because that is all you will get -- your rights. Jesus said it best, "It is better to give than to receive," {cf, Acts 20:35}.

Prayer

Lord, teach us to be giving people, generous people, not wanting something back, not always asking, "What's in it for me?" Help us to not be squeezed in the mold of the world around us that always wants an exchange. Teach us to be like yourself, Lord, to give freely and gladly and be quite content, even though nothing is given back. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.