



# CHARIS-MATTERS

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## STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

### Text

First Corinthians 9:1-18

### Topic

Paul explains to the believers at Corinth why he would rather die than demand his rights as an apostle

### Title

*"God's Got You Dead to Rights"*

## Introduction

Writing about our freedoms as Christians, Martin Luther made these two observations:

1. A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
2. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone.

It may sound like double-talk but it makes perfect spiritual sense. You are set free by Jesus to do and enjoy *anything* and *everything* that is not in-and-of itself sinful. But, since you love Jesus and those He loves, you are willing to limit your freedom so as to not cause another believer any harm.

Maybe an example would help. At least, that is what the apostle Paul thought. So he used himself as the example in chapter nine. He had significant rights as an apostle which he had voluntarily suspended in order to not hinder his preaching of the Gospel.

First Corinthians 9:1-18  
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Living in community with others we, too, have significant rights which we might need to voluntarily suspend in order to not hinder the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Should Always Be Ready To Defend Your Rights Under The Gospel, and #2 You Should Always Be Willing To Suspend Your Rights If They Hinder The Gospel.

## #1 You Should Always Be Ready To Defend Your Rights Under The Gospel

(v1-14)

In the last verse of chapter eight Paul said, “therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”

His strong statement might seem hypothetical. Had he given up eating meat? It's one thing to say you will do something and it's quite another to do it.

It's a reasonable question. In fact, I think it's an important question to ask those who are teaching you. Are they an example of the things they say?

Paul had given up far more than the eating of meat sacrificed to an idol. He'd given up some of his rights as an apostle.

Before he could talk about giving them up he had to give a defense for his rights. His rights as an apostle are the subject of these opening verses.

1 Corinthians 9:1 Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?

These questions all require a “Yes!” answer:

- “Am I not an apostle?” Yes, he was, in the unique first century sense of laying the foundation for the church and exercising signs and wonders.

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- “Am I not free?” Yes, he was just as “free,” he had just as much liberty in questionable behaviors as every other Christian. In fact, he understood Christian liberty more than all of them. Just read his defense of liberty at the church council in Jerusalem. His epistles, too, are full of freedom.
- “Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?” Yes, he had, on the road to Damascus. It was one of the requirements for an apostle that they had seen the risen Lord. He had seen Jesus and in a very dramatic fashion.

The question, “Are you not my work in the Lord,” is expanded upon in verse two.

1 Corinthians 9:2 If I am not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you. For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

Apparently there were critics of Paul everywhere he went that he was not a genuine apostle since he was one not of the original twelve. He brushed that off to point out that even if others might say that, the Corinthians knew better. After all, he had founded their church and performed the miraculous works of an apostle among them.

Having established he was an apostle, Paul listed a few of his rights:

1 Corinthians 9:3 My defense to those who examine me is this:

1 Corinthians 9:4 Do we have no right to eat and drink?

1 Corinthians 9:5 Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas [another name for Peter]?

1 Corinthians 9:6 Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working?

The apostles had the right to be materially supported by the churches they founded and served. Paul summarized the support they were due by mentioning three things:

1. “Eating and drinking” is a summary of basic human needs.
2. “Taking along a believing wife” meant that the fellowship should meet more than the basic needs in order to provide a decent living so that the apostles could raise a family.

3. “Refrain from working” indicated that the ministry itself should be understood as a full-time responsibility requiring a full-time wage.

We might note, in passing, that there is some important biographical information in these verses.

1. First we see that, without a doubt, Jesus had “brothers.” His mother, Mary, had other children after Him.
2. Second, we see that apostles had the right to be married, and that Peter was, in fact, married. Thus the teaching that celibacy is required of the church’s leaders is a false, extra-biblical teaching.

Paul established that he was an apostle and that apostles had the right to material support. An apostle was no different in that sense from any other laborer. Workers in every occupation had the right to receive support from their work. He listed some common occupations to make his point.

1 Corinthians 9:7 Who ever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock?

These three illustrations from everyday life show that the receiving of material support for your work is customary.

All this makes perfect sense. But it also needed to make Scriptural sense and so Paul gave them a biblical analysis of the right to receive wages for work.

1 Corinthians 9:8 Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also?

1 Corinthians 9:9 For it is written in the law of Moses, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE AN OX WHILE IT TREADS OUT THE GRAIN." Is it oxen God is concerned about?

1 Corinthians 9:10 Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope.

The “law” that Paul quoted was Deuteronomy 25:4. The “ox” was to be permitted to eat of the grain while he labored pulling the grinding wheel.

While the verse established the ethical treatment of animals under our stewardship, Paul indicated that it was intended to be applied to the proper treatment of human laborers. The worker is worthy of wages.

The apostles should receive wages just like every other laborer. In fact, all spiritual workers deserved wages, and they knew it because of what was happening in temples all over the Roman Empire.

1 Corinthians 9:11 If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things?

1 Corinthians 9:12 If others are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more? Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ.

1 Corinthians 9:13 Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar?

1 Corinthians 9:14 Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.

In God's Temple at Jerusalem, and in every pagan temple throughout the Empire, the "priests" were materially supported by those they ministered to. It was the expected, accepted practice.

This is a New Testament principle. Those who "[sow] spiritual things for you" deserve to "reap your material things." "Those who preach the Gospel should live from the Gospel."

If you are being ministered to spiritually then you are to support the ministry materially. In Second Corinthians Paul tells us that we should give financially to the church we attend and that our giving should be regular, sacrificial, and joyful.

Before we move on to Paul's major point let's notice something. He gave a fierce defense for his rights as an apostle and minister of the Gospel. He was not apologetic one bit. He used the Scripture and he appealed to what was customary to let them know he had rights.

We've been set free by Jesus to experience and enjoy everything that is not in-and-of itself sinful. We should be quick to defend our liberties in Christ. There are too many legalistic people who think of biblical Christianity as a list of Do's & Don'ts, people who are too quick to limit liberty. You've been set free to be in a relationship with the risen Lord.

Tucked away in these verses we read, in verse twelve, "nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the Gospel of Christ."

Paul had all the rights of an apostle, including the right to be materially supported. In Corinth he had voluntarily relinquished his right to receive support from them so as to not "hinder the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Even though it was the accepted and expected practice to pay ministers, there were a lot of abuses. In Second Corinthians Paul will mention those who go about "peddling the Word of God," who were taking advantage of believers for their own material gain (2:17). Just like today there were people who were only in it to take advantage of the generosity of God's people.

By relinquishing his rights, and by working with his own hands to support himself, Paul eliminated any possible hindrance to the Gospel from those who might accuse him of being in it only for gain.

All of this is preliminary to the point Paul wanted to make. Some in Corinth were demanding their right to eat the meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Paul had suggested they consider relinquishing their right for the sake of the Gospel. He could use himself as an example, having relinquished something far greater.

#2 You Should Always Be Willing To Suspend  
Your Rights If They Hinder The Gospel  
(v15-18)

First Corinthians 9:1-18  
*"God's Got You Dead to Rights"*

You've heard of having "Georgia on My Mind?" Paul had the Gospel on his mind. He mentioned "preaching the Gospel" four times in verses one through eighteen and referred to it three other times.

The Gospel is very simple. God came from Heaven to earth as a man. He lived a perfect, sinless life. He died on the Cross at Calvary for the sins of the world. He rose from the dead, validating all His claims. He is coming again. In the mean time all those who believe on Him are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul had brought that message to Corinth. Many had heard it, responded to it, and gotten saved.

We know that Paul did receive support from other churches, e.g., the church at Philippi. Why not be supported at Corinth?

I suggest that God the Holy Spirit led him to relinquish his rights because of the religious landscape in Corinth. As I mentioned, there were a lot of phonies ripping people off.

Second, the Holy Spirit could see ahead to the issues of liberty that would present themselves among the believers at Corinth. He was preparing Paul to be able to address the difficult issues of personal liberty by making his life an example to them.

I think sometimes a minister or a missionary gets criticized for the way they do things when, in fact, God is leading them in order to be an example to the believers, in order to teach them some things. We should thus adopt an attitude of looking more at ourselves and at what God the Holy Spirit might be teaching us rather than being critical of others and what appear to be shortcomings.

1 Corinthians 9:15 But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void.

He had relinquished his rights. He wasn't writing them to demand his rights. He would rather "die than that anyone should make my boasting void."

Before we take a look at what Paul meant by "his boasting," think about that word "die." He was serious. You see, he understood that if he stumbled another believer he was sinning both against them and against Jesus. He'd be better off dead and in a place where he could no longer hinder the work of the Gospel.

That is how seriously we ought to approach these issues. Yes, we must fiercely defend our rights in the Lord. But we must be willing to relinquish them for the sake of not hindering the Gospel in the lives of others.

1 Corinthians 9:16 For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!

He wasn't "boasting" that he was an apostle. It was a "necessity laid upon" him by Jesus the day he was saved. It was his calling, his gifting.

1 Corinthians 9:17 For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship.

Here Paul compared his being an apostle with being a steward in a household. A steward was a slave who was elevated to run his masters affairs. The steward wasn't paid wages the way a laborer was.

So, if he was not boasting about being an apostle, what was he boasting about?

1 Corinthians 9:18 What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel.

At the Reward Seat of Jesus Paul was not expecting anything from the Lord for doing what he was called upon to do. He was called to be an apostle and he understood it to be a stewardship empowered by God.



Do you expect extra pay at work for doing the bare minimum? Do you expect praise for arriving on time? For not leaving early? For not taking long lunches? No; that's your job!

Paul was expecting to be rewarded for **how** he did his work. And at least in the case of the Corinthian church he was expecting to be rewarded by Jesus because he had listened to the Holy Spirit and had relinquished his right to receive material support from them in order to be an example to them.

When he said, "that I may not abuse my authority in the Gospel," I think he meant two things:

1. It was obvious he was not using his considerable authority abusively because he was not taking anything from them, only giving things to them.
2. He wasn't in any way using his authority abusively by telling them to do something he had not already done. He was able to speak with loving authority on the subject of them relinquishing their rights **because he himself had done so.**

Defend your rights but always realize that God's got you dead to rights. You and I live in community with other believers and must factor in how our liberties in questionable things affect others.

You know the famous saying, "Give me liberty or give me death?" In the area of Christian liberty Paul might have said, "Give-up my liberty or give me death." He would rather die than hinder the Gospel.

Would you? Would I?