

Christ is enough

1 Corinthians 9:1-18

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"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." — The Unanimous Declaration of Independence of the 13 Colonies of the United States. July 4, 1776.

Just recently, millions of Americans celebrated the Declaration of their Independence from British rule in 1776. As always, they did so with much fanfare, fireworks, and displays of heartfelt patriotism. I too am an American. But I ask myself: do we really know what we are celebrating? I remember one time having a discussion with a lady about human rights. She was very serious and defensive of all human rights and an atheist. I asked her: "Why do people have rights at all?" She went blank. Finally, she said something like: "Because rights are good." Then, I asked her: "How do you know what is good?" She froze again. You see, governments came up with the idea of people having certain rights, in large part because they understood that human beings were made in the image of God and therefore endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. The Magna Carta, which predated the Declaration of Independence by some 500 plus years, and was very influential in its drafting, was partly based on this same idea. Ultimately, if you do not believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, you may also believe in human rights and morality, but in the end, you will have no foundation for those things. You are simply being pragmatic, and so there really might be no end to what you consider to be your "rights".

Americans have passed the idea of rights and fighting for your rights all over the world. In an age obsessed with fighting for rights, many of us do not understand what it means to give up our rights for the sake of God. Today, Paul is going to talk about his own rights, but he doesn't sound anything like the people of this world. Here, in the following passages from 1st Corinthians 9, Paul is going to show us the beauty of giving up our rights instead of fighting for them. In short, he is going to teach us what it means to die to ourselves, pick up our cross, and follow the Lord Jesus.

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 9:1-3)

Paul begins by reminding the Corinthians of what they already know. Paul is a real Apostle. He saw Jesus after he rose from the dead. He was commanded by Jesus to go and preach the Gospel. The Corinthians were the fruit of his work. But what exactly makes an Apostle an Apostle? Many words in the Bible have multiple meanings. Elder can mean someone who holds the office of Pastor or simply an older person. Deacon can mean someone who holds a special office in the church, or it can simply mean servant. Apostle is the same. Apostle is a transliteration of the Greek word *Apostelos*. It means messenger. In the Greek New Testament, there are times it is used to speak of common people who were carrying messages between different towns or people. But whenever you read the word Apostle in the English Bible, it is an office. It is a special God-ordained position of honor and leadership.

Having said that, I want to take a few seconds to address a concern I have today. If you are a Christian, then you agree that Paul is an Apostle, but you might ask the question, are there modern-day Apostles like Paul, Peter or John? I am not going to get into that subject too deeply today because it takes us away from our text, but I will tell you that theologians have consistently agreed that there were at least three requirements of an Apostle. **First**, they had to have seen the risen Jesus. **Second**, they must have been given the task of Apostle by Jesus himself. There is a story where the Apostles want to replace Judas who betrayed Jesus. Knowing that nobody could appoint an Apostle, they cast lots to ensure that the appointment would be God's decision. Every other office they just appointed or chose the best person. They appointed Elders and Deacons. They never appointed an Apostle. Only Jesus can do that.

Lastly, those who were appointed did miraculous signs and wonders. This is the dangerous one. Because many people claim they can do miracles. They even claim they have raised the dead or cured AIDS. I believe God can do any of those things through any means he chooses. But it is the message, and the action and attitudes of the messenger that will confirm him. A bad tree cannot produce good fruit, and neither can a good tree produce bad fruit. Remember that the next time you hear someone saying they are God's Apostle. Because I've seen plenty of self-proclaimed Apostles that bear nothing but bad fruit, both in their lives and in their ministry. Beware of them. In any case, in our text, Paul's focus is not on exalting himself or his office. Rather, he is trying to say that as a God-ordained Apostle, he has as much or more rights than anyone else. And, yet, as we will see in the next verses, Paul chooses to renounce all the rights and privileges he has as an Apostle, in order to better serve Christ and his brothers in Christ.

There are only two main ideas in our text today, but I want to outline the thoughts in these passages for you and focus on their application to the Christian life more generally. It is like this:

1. Paul has the right to ask for support from the church (v. 3-14).
2. Paul does not use this right, because he wants to give the Gospel free of charge (v. 15-18)
3. Paul gives up his rights, because Christ is enough.

1. Paul has the right to ask for support from the church

Paul, in verses 3-14 gives us six reasons that he, as an Apostle, deserves to be supported. He is not looking for money or food. He is using his own life as an example. Last week, we were talking about how love gives up for other people. This passage has the same idea. Only now, he is going to use his own life as an example of love. You see, even though Paul had the right to be supported, he gave up that right. Let's look at the six reasons Paul deserves to be supported. This is a good way to understand why Pastors, missionaries, and others who dedicate themselves to the ministry of the Gospel and are selected by the church fulltime have the right to support.

This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to eat and drink? 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? (1 Corinthians 9:3-6)

First, if other Apostles of Jesus have the right to support from the Corinthians, so does Paul. All of these men were financially supported by the churches. But Paul was no less an Apostle. He was just as important. Doesn't it make sense that he should have support from the church he founded?

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?
(1 Corinthians 9:7)

Second, doesn't it make common sense that those who work would receive wages for doing so? Soldiers and farmers expect to receive something in exchange for their labor. Paul says, doesn't it also make sense that he would also have the right to financial support from the Corinthians?

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. (1 Corinthians 9:8-10)

Third, Paul is teaching the principle in a lesser to greater way. This just means that if something is true in a lesser way, it is definitely true in a greater way. Animals are very important to God. So important that he gives a law to protect them in the harvest. The ox works hard to produce grain, so God commands the ox to eat from the harvest. But as special as oxen are, they are not made in God's image. So in the end, the Apostle reasons, if the ox deserves to be supported according to the law, how much more does the very Apostle of God who labored and founded their church, deserve to be supported by them? Paul continues his argument along these same lines in the following passage:

If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? 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. (1 Corinthians 9:11-12)

Fourth, Paul has sown something much more valuable than material things into the Corinthians lives, so they should be willing to return it with material blessings. It just makes sense that if a person is used of God to lead us away from eternal destruction, we would want to honor the person God sent to bless us.

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 the sacrificial offerings?
(1 Corinthians 9:13)

Fifth, God has commanded that the priests of the Old Testament receive their food from the offerings of the people. So, if Paul is serving to build God's modern-day temple, should he not also receive support from them? Again, Paul is arguing from the lesser to the greater but also by analogy.

In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the Gospel should get their living by the Gospel. (1 Corinthians 9:14)

Lastly, Jesus commanded that people who have dedicated their lives to the Gospel should receive support for doing so. He could have just said this and ended the conversation, because Christ is the highest authority. But Paul is wise. He wants the Corinthians to fully realize what he is doing. It should be very clear that he has the right to be paid and supported.

2. Paul does not exercise his right, because he wants to give the Gospel free of charge

But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting. For if I preach the Gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the Gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the Gospel. (1 Corinthians 9:15-18)

Paul is convinced he has the right to their support. He knows it. He has the right, and so he is the right one in the argument. This was exactly how the puffed-up group felt in chapter 8. This is how the "I follow Apollos or Paul or Cephas" groups felt in the first 4 chapters. This is how the sexually immoral group felt in chapter 6. They were sure they were right, even though they were wrong. But Paul shocks them and us with the beauty of his sacrifice. Truly having all these rights, he gladly gives them all up out of love for his brethren and for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ his King. The Corinthians were all boasting in the wrong things. Paul boasts in the right things, in knowing Christ. To Paul, God is so beautiful and worthy that he will sacrifice anything to better know him and his Son Jesus Christ. His boast is that God is so good, and his love so overwhelming in his heart that giving up his rights to preach for free is nothing compared to the fellowship with God he gains by doing so.

Is your idea about Christianity, about keeping laws or knowing Christ? To paraphrase the famed preacher Charles Simeon: *“It is a terrible mistake to imagine that Christian morality consists in a mere abstinence from outward sins, or a compliance with outward observances: the heart must be given up to God, and the whole soul be engaged in seeking his glory.”*

Some of us at times see God’s word as a rule book that tells me how far I can go before sinning. We want to know how many steps we have the “right” to take before God sees it as sin. But, what if that is the wrong question? What if the question is, how could I live to make God the most famous? How could I live to love others? How could I live as Jesus lived? To truly know Christ, you must walk as he walked. If your only goal is to not break a rule, you are missing the beauty of knowing Jesus. The more we live like Jesus lived, the more we know Jesus. Therefore, let’s be people who give up our rights. Paul did not give up his rights because he was original. He was just following Jesus. Jesus left his glory. He refused to use his right to turn stones into bread, so he might teach us that we must live by God’s Word. He refused to exercise his right to call angels to defend himself, so he might teach us patience and to commend the judgment of all things to God. He refused to strike back at those who struck him, so he might teach us how God loves his enemies. That is our Lord. We must be a people who know what is good. We have our Jesus as an example. Jesus gave up his rights for the benefit of others. This leads me to my last point.

3. Paul gave up his rights, because Christ is enough

From other parts of the New Testament, we can clearly see that Paul believed knowing Christ was all he needed to be joyful, happy, content and fulfilled. A person said to me recently, “I work all day, then I come home, and I just need to rest. Then, I can be in a good mood.” I heard another man say that if his wife would just do what he says, then they would get along. There were many things I could have said to these men who were seeking help and advice. But the fundamental problem they had was that they were both thinking Christ + something else = me happy. Christ + relaxation = me happy. Christ + my wife’s cooperation = me happy. You fill in the blank: Christ + popularity= me happy; Christ + a good job= me happy; Christ + a saved spouse= me happy. They are all lies.

Here is how God sees that way of thinking: Christ + something better than Christ = your happiness. Christ should not be a cherry on top of your ice cream. He is where all true fulfillment is found. Paul says in Romans 8:5-6, that *“those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. Because to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”*

When I told both of these men that Christ was all they needed, they reacted. They tried to argue. “But I am just tired.” “But my wife won’t listen.” Let me tell you something: if you are not setting your mind on the things of Christ, you can forget about your wife listening to you. I mean God is just: if you won’t listen to him, why should he give you a wife that listens to you? The Apostle Paul is a perfect example of a man who set his mind on the things of the Spirit and experienced life and peace. Paul, in Acts 16, is chained to a prison wall after a vicious beating. During those days, prisoners used the bathroom on themselves while they were chained to the wall. On top of that, it was almost impossible to sleep standing up. What would it take to make you sing when you are exhausted in the middle of the night, bleeding and in pain, chained to the wall? What would it take?

Listen carefully: Christ was Paul's peace there because Paul set his heart and mind on Christ. When you seek after the things of the Spirit, Christ will be your all in all. Paul explains this idea clearly in Philippians 4:11-13:

“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

Can you say that in whatever situation you are content? Can you sing in the prison? If knowing and experiencing Christ is not your all-consuming goal in life, then you will just jump from one thing to another, getting emptier with every move. Bored with sports, now I will try cars. Bored with shoes, now I will try cooking. The grass is always greener at the next lie. Some of you here today are Christians, but you do not know this kind of faith or power. Whatever minor problem you face, it devastates you. Here is what you need to hear: Your situations are not too big for Christ to give you peace in the middle of them. Your problem is that your view of Jesus is too small. You don't believe he is enough for life and peace, and you believe the lies of the world that promise you fulfillment in something other than Christ.

Stop believing the advertisements promising that the new next best thing will bring that joy. Stop believing that if you just had money, or power or honor or pleasure or beauty, you would be happy. God loves you, dear ones, and Christ is enough for whatever situation you find yourself in. If he is enough for the chains and the prisons Paul endured, how could he be too weak for your situation? Here is the real formula you should believe: Christ + nothing else = contentment. Begin by asking God to show you where you are finding your happiness, joy, contentment and fulfillment. Confess those sins and ask him to show you how he is greater. Stop trying to keep a set of rules and start seeking to know and experience Christ. Set your mind on the things of the Spirit and you will find the joy you were looking for in other things. You will also find the power to give up your rights and the strength to endure all things, even with a good attitude. It is possible. May the conviction of God come on us today. May we cast out everything and anything we are adding to Jesus, so we might truly know him and experience the power of his resurrection in our lives.

Discussion questions:

1. Paul had opinions and rights. But he did not use them. How is his life an example for us?
2. Can Christians be idolaters? (Colossians 3:5)
3. What thing besides Jesus would really make you happy? Is that true?
4. What situation is the power of Christ too small for?
5. Please read Philippians 4:13. How did Paul learn to be content?
6. How could you better set your mind on the things of the Spirit?
7. What does Jesus Christ mean to you? Is he just something you are adding to other things in your life, or is he everything to you?