

# 1 Corinthians: A Letter to a Troubled Church

*A Missional Sacrifice (1 Corinthians 9:1-27)*

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on August 13, 2023

## Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're stepping back into a series in 1 Corinthians that we paused in the spring. We're going to pick up right where we left off in chapter 9. But such a long hiatus calls for a brief recap. Jumping into chapter 9 is like opening a book right in the middle or to walk into a movie halfway through. It's confusing without the previous context. So I'll give a high-level summary of what we've previously covered.
  - Paul wrote this letter to the church in Corinth – a church he founded years earlier. A church comprised of Gentile believers, converted out of a pagan background where they had been accustomed to worshipping in pagan temples dedicated to Roman gods.
  
- ❖ **Now the tone of this letter is a stern rebuke. But it's like the rebuke of a loving father.** Paul had received a letter telling him about factions developing among them. Each claiming allegiance to this or that leader. They were very knowledgeable and spiritually-gifted. **But their advanced knowledge and spectacular gifts puffed up their pride and hampered their ability to work out their disagreements over how Christians ought to behave.**
  
- ❖ **So in chapter 8, Paul addresses one of those ethical disagreements that was threatening the church's unity.** It was a matter the Corinthians raised in that letter they sent. It had to do with the ethics of eating food that had been offered to idols.
  - As we mentioned before, there are three scenarios where this issue might have come up. Paul says that one scenario is strictly prohibited for Christians. **That's where you're eating the food in a temple, in a religious feast, as an extension of idol worship.** He's going to say in chapter 10:14-22 that that's just flat out idolatry.
  
- ❖ But there are two other scenarios where Paul would say that it's permissible for a Christian to eat food previously offered to idols. **One is where you're purchasing it from the meat market near the local temple and consuming it at home. And the other is where you're eating the food in an idol's temple but in a non-idolatrous social event.** Temples, in those days, served as public dining halls. You'd eat there like you'd eat in a public restaurant today.
  - Paul would say you have the right, in both scenarios, to eat with a clean conscience. But not everyone in the church of Corinth saw it that way. **Some felt strongly that eating food that had been offered to idols – in any scenario – would associate you with idolatry.** They saw it as ethically wrong for a Christian.
    - **But on the other side were believers in Corinth who knew that food is just food.** That idols aren't real. So they had no problem eating this kind of meat. And they were going to defend their rights against these legalistic Christians.
  
- ❖ But Paul's response is to urge them to care more about building up others and advancing the gospel – instead of caring so much about your rights and what you're free to do as a Christian. He agrees that you can eat in those latter two scenarios. **But unlike those focused on protecting their rights, Paul is willing to lay down his rights if the free exercise of it negatively affects others.** Listen to how he ends chapter 8, *“Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”* (8:13)

- ❖ The moral calculus that Paul uses to make ethical decisions is so different compared to how decisions are made in our day. We live in a culture that's so adamant about protecting our rights. Preserving our freedoms. **For many people, the ethical framework they operate out of says, "I can do whatever I want as long as it's within my rights."** A Christian might add, "And as long as it's not a sin. As long as it doesn't violate Scripture." That's the primary concern driving their actions and decisions. But that falls short of a truly Christian ethic.
  - **What Paul taught and what he modeled in his life and ministry is – *not* an ethic of rights and freedoms – but an ethic of love and missions.** He operated out of the framework that says, "I will do whatever it takes to build up others; to advance the gospel; to remove any obstacles in the path of someone coming to know Jesus – even at the cost of denying myself and laying aside my rights." I will become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some (9:22).
- ❖ **Let me walk us through chapter 9, which is essentially Paul giving his readers a practical example of this kind of ethical decision-making, by pointing to a prior decision he made while living among them.** Namely, he refrained from exercising his right as an apostle to receive material support from the Corinthians.
  - He's going to make three arguments in this chapter. (1) A Christian's rights should be respected; (2) A Christian's rights can be laid aside; (3) A Christian's mission calls for adaptability and self-control.

### **A Christian's Rights Should Be Respected**

- ❖ Let's consider the first argument: **A Christian's rights should be respected.** That's what he emphasizes in vv1-14. Which seems strange since his whole point is to explain why we should sometimes forgo those rights. So why spend so many verses defending our rights?
  - But if you think about it, it makes sense. **If I refuse to enjoy something, it's only a selfless sacrifice if I deserved that something in the first place.** If I said, "I'm going to lay aside my right to take your car for a joy ride," you're going to think, "Okay, but you never had that right in the first place." **Only when it's something I deserve by rights – only then does the laying aside of it look like love.**
- ❖ Yes, Paul's point is to present his refusal of their support as an example of a loving Christian ethic. **But the example only works if he deserves their support – if it was his right in the first place.** He had to insist that since some were questioning Paul's authority as an apostle.
  - **Apparently, his decision *not* to accept their support and instead to work for a living, led some to question his apostleship.** Other apostles and other teachers that came after him were willing to accept their support. They had no problem exercising their apostolic right. So what's wrong with Paul? Maybe he's not really an apostle.
- ❖ That's why he asserts his apostleship in v1 "*Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?*" **So two marks of true apostleship are that (1) you've seen the risen Lord Jesus – which Paul did on the road to Damascus – and (2) you've been sent by Christ to establish new churches in new unreached regions.**

- ❖ And that's why Paul says, in v2, that even if others doubt my apostleship, you Corinthians should not doubt it since your very existence as a church authenticates it. You are the seal of my apostleship!
- ❖ Then in v3 he begins his defense. Again, he's not defending his refusal to exercise his apostolic rights. He's defending the fact that he even has these rights in the first place. Look at his rhetorical questions starting in v4. **He's arguing that he has the right to eat and drink.** That is, to receive food and drink from the Corinthians as a means of material support.
  - **He also has the right to take along a believing wife on his missionary journeys.** It's a right we know he didn't exercise because he talked about his commitment to singleness back in chapter 7. And since apparently most of the apostles were married, that just reinforced their doubts about his apostleship.
    - **And then in v6, Paul says he has the right to refrain from working for a living.** While he was living with the Corinthians, ministering among them, he had the right to expect 100% financial and material support from them.
- ❖ **Then, in v7, he offers three examples from everyday life where you would expect a person to draw sustenance and support from the fruit of their labor.** No soldier serves at his own expense. While he's serving, he expects to be fed, housed, and clothed by the army. Likewise, you would expect a vinedresser to at least taste the fruit of his vineyard or a shepherd to at least drink some of the milk from his goats. **Likewise, you would expect a spiritual shepherd to be supported by the flock that he is spiritually tending.**
- ❖ Now these real life examples are great, but they don't carry the same weight of authority as Scripture, so in vv8-10, Paul appeals to OT Law to support his case. He quotes **Deuteronomy 25:4**, which says, "*You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.*" Which conveys the same point – that the worker deserves his wages. **You are permitted to enjoy material blessings from the fruits of your labor.** Listen to v11, "*If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?*"
  - Now, in v12, Paul is going to explain the reason why he renounced his rights. **But notice how, in vv13-14, he interrupts his explanation by offering two more pieces of supporting evidence.** One comes from the practice of temples, whether Jewish or pagan. That is, the priests who made the sacrifices were permitted to take a share of the sacrificial food. The second comes from the words of Jesus who, "*commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.*" (Lk 10:7)
- ❖ So I know it seems like Paul is belaboring his point. He's trying so hard to argue for a right that, in the end, he doesn't want to exercise. But that *is* the main point. And unless that is established, such a sacrifice won't be understood as love.
  - **So yes, brothers and sisters, as Christians, you too have rights.** According to the gospel that Paul preaches, you are no longer under law. You are free in Christ. **And your Christian freedom confers to you certain rights.**

- ❖ For example, you are no longer under the OT food laws, so you have the right to eat or drink whatever you want. Or, for example, as one who is subject to governing authorities, you have the right to legal recourse if someone defrauds you. You can take them to court.
  - You have these rights. They should be recognized and respected. But here's the question: Do they always need to be exercised? **As Paul argues in this letter, there are times where you should seriously consider forgoing those rights.** There are times you shouldn't eat whatever you want (8:13; 10:28; 11:33). And there are times you shouldn't take that person to court (6:1).

### **A Christian's Rights Can Be Laid Aside**

- ❖ That leads to our second point. **Though a Christian's rights should be respected, a Christian's rights can be laid aside.** They're not absolute. They shouldn't be the most important factor in your moral calculus. Because there are times – and for good reason – that you should forgo your rights. And in v12, Paul points to one of those times and gives us one of those reasons. *“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.”*
  - **Paul says if the choice to enjoy some right or privilege of his bears the risk of impeding the work of the gospel – by laying a stumbling block for someone's faith – then it's not worth it.** He will willingly lay that right aside for the good of another. Rights are real and should be respected. But they're not the highest good.
- ❖ **Paul would say that a Christian right should never be demanded at the expense of our Christian mission.** The salvation of someone's soul matters so much more. That's how Paul saw it. He knows he's an apostle. He knows he could demand their financial support.
  - But he also knows the people he's ministering to. In this case, Paul knows that, in Corinth, to exercise his apostolic right could endanger his apostolic mission. **So as one who is free in Christ, he's free to forgo his rights to advance his mission.**
- ❖ **Now you might be wondering why receiving support from the Corinthian church could've endangered the work of the gospel?** Because, in the book of Acts, we read of other instances, in other cities, where Paul did receive support from those he's ministering to (Acts 16:15). But in other cities like Corinth, he refused that right and insisted on supporting himself, working with his hands as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3).
  - Now Paul doesn't spell out why receiving support from the Corinthians could've endangered his gospel work. But commentators theorize that it might relate to the problem he addressed in chapters 1-2 where the Corinthians assigned too much weight to the eloquence and rhetorical skills of their teachers.
    - So likewise, they put too much weight on the “fees” these teachers charged. **They had a tendency to assess the worth of a Christian teacher based on how much he charged. So Paul hoped to undermine that immature thinking by charging nothing at all!**

- ❖ Some other commentators think his decision had more to do with the fact that, in the region of Corinth, there were many itinerant teachers coming through the city representing various pagan philosophies, and they expected a high degree of financial and material support from their adherents. **So since the gospel message he was preaching would've been seen as just another new philosophy come to town – Paul wanted to set the gospel apart.** He wanted to preach the gospel free of charge to communicate the freeness of the gospel. It's nothing like the wisdom of this world. At the heart of the gospel is the message of free grace.
- ❖ I think that's what Paul has in mind when he talks about boasting in his freedom to offer the gospel free of charge. This is in vv15-18. He makes clear that he's not bringing up his rights in order to guilt trip them to start supporting him. No, he doesn't want it. He goes so far as to say in v15, *“For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting.”*
  - Now let's not misinterpret that. **Paul's boast is not a boast in comparison to other Christian teachers who do accept support.** He's not judging them for making that choice. He just spent fourteen verses arguing that that is their right. So his boast is not a boast in himself or about how sacrificial he is compared to others. **No, his boast is in the freeness of the gospel communicated by the freeness of his gospel ministry.** That's what he doesn't want anyone to take from him.
- ❖ **Paul says he doesn't boast in the fact that he preaches the gospel. To him, that's like boasting in the fact that you breathe air.** Good for you – that's what you're supposed to do. Look at vv16-17, *“<sup>16</sup>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! <sup>17</sup>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.”*
  - Now again, don't get him wrong. Paul is *not* suggesting that God is forcing him against his will to preach the gospel. **He just means that being a gospel preacher is not just one of many career options that a person chooses to pursue.**
- ❖ No, it is a divine calling. It's a stewardship. And, in biblical times, a steward was a household slave called by the master to run the household whenever he was away. **The steward holds great responsibility. The steward handles the master's most prized possessions. But all without getting paid.**
  - In Paul's eyes, he is a slave of Christ. A steward handling his master's most prized possession – the gospel. **And his reward – his payoff – is the freedom he has to preach the gospel without pay.** Free of charge. Look at v18, *“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.”*
- ❖ So that's what Paul is proud of. **His freedom in Christ means he is free to conduct his gospel ministry in such a way to more clearly convey the freeness of the gospel.** To stress that you cannot earn your salvation. That leading a good life will never outweigh the depths of your sin. That you are saved only by receiving the free offer of salvation based on the good life and the good death that Christ Jesus accomplished for you.

- ❖ **Anything that might hinder that message, obscure that message, or confuse that message – Paul is willing to lay aside, even if it means laying aside his rights.** So think about those examples from earlier. A Christian has the right to eat whatever she wants. She is free from OT dietary restrictions. But I can imagine a missionary in a predominantly Muslim context, exercising her freedom to refrain from eating pork and adopting a Halal diet, so that her home can be a hospitable place for her Muslim friends to dine. She's denying herself a right, so that she can better convey the hospitality and warmth of Christ in the gospel.
  - **Or I can imagine a Christian refusing the right to take a fellow church member to court.** Instead, he turns to the church to help resolve their dispute and to demonstrate, for the watching world, the power of the gospel of grace to reconcile two parties. In the same way as we, unholy sinners, have been reconciled to a Holy God by the blood of the cross of Jesus Christ. That's why we might lay aside a right.

### **A Christian's Mission Calls For Adaptability and Self-Control**

- ❖ Again, our rights should be respected. **We can't require or force Christians to lay aside their rights.** And that's not what Paul is doing. He's not demanding all gospel preachers to refuse support like him. **But he is trying to inspire all believers, by personal example, to be more adaptable and to voluntarily deny yourself for the sake of your gospel mission.** That leads to our third point: A Christian's mission calls for adaptability and self-control.
  - Listen to v19, "*For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.*" So for Paul, he used his freedom in Christ to make himself a servant to all – for the sake of winning them all to Christ.
- ❖ **And by making himself a servant, he means he adapted his behavior.** Sometimes exercising a right. Sometimes laying it aside. All depending on the situation and who he's trying to reach for Christ.
  - **When he's among Jews – trying to win them to Christ – Paul will lay aside his right to eat whatever he wants and adopt a kosher diet (v20).** If he's ministering to those under OT law, then he's going to be as one under the law. The key word is "as" one under the law because he insists in v20 that he's not actually under the law.
    - So as a Christian, Paul felt no compulsion to obey kosher law. So when he does eat kosher, his behavior might resemble a Jew, but he's compelled by an entirely different motivation. **The Jews eat kosher out of religious obligation. Paul does so out of missional concern – out of evangelistic zeal.**
- ❖ And then when he's among those outside the law (that is, Gentiles), Paul will exercise his right to eat whatever dish is served to him in a Gentile's home. **And again, the motivation is what matters.** When he abandons a kosher diet, it's *not* with the attitude that says, "I'm free in Christ. You can't tell me what not to eat."
  - **No, the reason he doesn't keep kosher around Gentiles is to make clear that you're not saved by the law but by God's free grace alone in the gospel.** That's why he does it. And he sums up his approach beautifully at the end of v22, "*I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.*"

- ❖ **If you follow Paul’s example – to the very religious on either side (whether you’re very Jewish or very Gentile) – to them it looks like you’re selling out.** It looks like contradictory, hypocritical behavior. You act like this around these people. Then you act like that around those people. You’re a chameleon. You don’t have any principles.
  - Well, if you’re looking through a framework primarily concerned with protecting individual rights, then you probably won’t respect the way Paul handles himself in these situations. His behavior *will* look contradictory. Like he lacked any principles.
    - **But if you’re looking through a framework that is primarily concerned with winning people to Christ – then you will recognize that there’s actually an overarching, consistent principle guiding all of his actions.**
  
- ❖ Paul would tell you, “First of all, I’m not changing my gospel in any way to avoid causing any offense to any group of people. **No, my message doesn’t change. But how I deliver my message – and how I carry myself – might change if it helps to advance the cause of Christ.** I’m not changing my behavior around different people because I’m trying to win their approval. I’m trying to win them to Christ. So I want to preach to them without unnecessary obstacles or distractions.” Look at v23, “*I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*” All of it comes out of a concern for the gospel.
  
- ❖ **So here’s an example to consider. If you’re a Christian – especially one who lives in America – you have the right to free speech.** You have the right to express whatever political or ideological position you hold. If you strongly believe it, you can say it in any social setting or on any social media platform. **But are the only people you’re trying to win for Christ, the kind who already agree with you on contentious political or ideological issues?** Wouldn’t it be love to lay aside your right to freely and uncritically express your opinions – in order to avoid any unnecessary obstacles to winning your friends to Christ?
  - **And I’m not at all saying you should pretend to hold certain positions or opinions in order to ingratiate yourself with a certain audience.** I’m just saying we should consider Paul’s example. Where he was known – not for his opinion of Caesar or his views on empire – but for his zeal to win people to Christ. Does that sound like you? Does that motivation mark your life?
  
- ❖ **Operating out of this kind of ethical framework is not going to be easy.** You’ll have to deny yourself. To hold back your impulses. To resist your instincts. Because it’s not about you being true to yourself and protecting your rights. **It’s about doing whatever it takes to advance the gospel and to remove any obstacles in the path of someone coming to Jesus.**
  - That’s going to take some self-control, which is why Paul ends the chapter with the imagery of an athlete. His point is that if athletes discipline their bodies – exercising strict self-control and self-restraint – just to win a perishable wreath that withers away – **then how much more self-control should we apply in our mission to win people to Christ?** Knowing that our prize is the imperishable souls of our saved friends and family, how much more self-restraint should we exercise? How much more should we deny ourselves and lay aside our rights for the sake of love and gospel?