



AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians
TEACHER – Lesson 14

GENERAL OUTLINE

1 Corinthians 7:1-11:16, Questions asked about marriage, idols & head coverings

OUTLINE: Lesson 14

1 Corinthians 9:1-27, Self-denial (for the benefit of others)

- 9:1-14 Introductory arguments
- 9:15-18 Paul's example
- 9:19-23 The principle explained and applied
- 9:24-27 Personal self-discipline

In the preceding chapter, Paul called his readers to forego the exercise of certain freedoms if so needed to avoid causing a brother to stumble. All of the major problems in the Corinthian church were related to relationships between Christians, and particularly to their failure to submit self-interest to the well-being of other members of the spiritual body. Paul realizes how difficult and how counter-cultural it is to overcome self-centeredness for the good of others. So, in chapter 9, he opens a lengthy section that presses the importance of humility and sacrifice.

Chapter 8 and 10 address directly questions related to the eating of foods offered to idols or served in pagan temples. Even though chapter 9 is focused more on how we exercise our rights, the discussion is still set in the general context of foods, idolatry and the danger of causing our brothers to stumble.

DISCUSSION

1 Corinthians 9:1-14, Introductory arguments

Paul ended chapter 8 with the personal claim that, if needed, he would change his diet to avoid causing a brother in Christ to violate his conscience. The early verses of chapter 9 explain the force of this claim. As an apostle, Paul had all kinds of "rights," and the Corinthians knew from their association with Paul that he had systematically relinquished those rights. So in his call for them to serve one another, he was preaching what he had a history of practicing.

There is also debate over the degree to which Paul is defending his authority as an apostle against some people (possibly visitors to Corinth) who claimed that he was not a full-fledged apostle like Peter (Cephas) and others. Some of his critics may have claimed that he didn't accept pay for his ministry since he wasn't a true apostle. In our study, we will look at how prominent this theory is, and how it might be balanced with other factors. Whatever their criticism, Paul asserts his rights and explains the real reason he didn't use them.

1. What credentials did Paul possess that could arguably give him certain rights?

He was an apostle, had freedom in Christ, had seen Christ, had established the congregation, was known well by the Corinthians. If any group of Christians had rights and privileges, Paul would be included.

2. In what way was Paul “free” (v. 1) that would have relevance in this discussion (cf. v. 19)?

This can be understood in a variety of ways, and it is difficult to pin down one precise answer. In verse 19, he will expand the phrase to “free from all men,” meaning that he was not a slave. This could be the meaning in verse 1.

We could also understand this as a more general claim to be free of obligation in any worldly way to all men. That is, if he didn’t exercise a freedom it was voluntarily and not because of any obligation. This would certainly fit the context of the argument.

3. What rights does Paul claim as rights that he possessed, but didn’t use?

- a. The right to eat and drink (probably in the context of his food or daily bread being paid for by the church).
- b. The right to marry and be accompanied on his travels by his wife with adequate support for the two of them.
- c. The right to be supported by churches so that he need not have a secular job to support himself.

4. Is Paul criticizing other apostles for exercising some privileges that he refrained from using, or suggesting that those who used such benefits were less spiritual than he? In other words, is his purpose here to set a standard for apostles and evangelists, or something else? If something else, what?

Paul’s whole point is that if he didn’t use certain rights, it was entirely voluntary on his part. There was no obligation or higher spiritual achievement involved. He didn’t use these rights because, in his case, he thought it would be better for his ministry and for those to whom he ministered. He is not criticizing other apostles and evangelists who had chosen to work differently.

This is an expression of freedom and a variety of choices that we sometimes fail to respect. Making sacrifices for the benefit of others is a solid Christian virtue, but the selection of which sacrifices to make is left to the individual. Paul did not legislate, and neither should we.

5. From various passages in Acts and Paul's letters, what do we know of Paul's sources of financial income or support? Cp. Acts 16:15; 18:3; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9; 1 Corinthians 4:12; Philippians 4:14-18.

- a. Patronage (generosity by a particular benefactor): Lydia in Acts 16:15. Cf. Luke 8:3.
- b. Tent making (vocational ministry): Acts 18:3; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9; 1 Cor 4:12.
- c. Support from elsewhere (other churches): Philippians 4:14-18.
- d. He is not known to have charged set fees as some traveling teachers did.

6. What common sense examples does Paul cite to illustrate his right to be paid for his work?

Soldiers, farmers (vineyard keepers) and shepherds.

7. Paul refers to oxen used in threshing grain and points out that the Law of Moses required the farmer to allow the animals to eat some of the grain, but then claims that the oxen are a metaphor for any laborer. Check the quotation from Deuteronomy 25:4. How can this command about animals be used to support Paul's argument (cf. Matthew 6:26)?

It's hard to maintain that Deuteronomy 25:4 wasn't about literal oxen. However, it is presented in a passage that is about people rather than animals: 25:1-3, legal punishment; 25:5-10, providing heirs for a deceased relative.

Paul is probably presenting this case to support the simple principle that is spelled out in 1 Corinthians 9:10. Jesus referred to God's care for birds to illustrate the idea that if he cares for birds, he will certainly care for people. In like manner, if an animal is to benefit from his work, then surely people (and especially an apostle) can expect no less.

The oxen illustration is intended more as an example than a proof.

8. It seems clear that at some point (either when he wrote 1 Corinthians, or at least by the time he wrote 2 Corinthians) some people were contesting Paul's claim to be a real apostle. Is that his reason in this chapter for affirming his rights, or is there something else more important at this point? If so, what?

Paul asserts his identity as an apostle (1:1; 9:1ff), but doesn't argue the point. He simply states that he is an apostle, and then argues that as such, he had certain rights. He states clearly (vv. 12 & 15) that his concern at this point is to present himself as an example of someone who had rights, and for the benefit of others he did not use those rights. The

reason for not using his rights was so that he would not “hinder the gospel.” Simply setting the record straight on his apostolic credentials seems to be secondary in this passage.

9. If, as Paul says, Jesus commanded that “those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel,” was Paul disobedient to a command of the Lord by refusing support from the Corinthians? Where is this command recorded?

Jesus presented this principle in Luke 10:7 (cf. Matthew 10:10). In the context of Luke 10 (commissioning of the Seventy), the command is specific to those seventy men, but the principle is general to all workers deserving to be paid for their work. The quote about the oxen and the idea of a worker deserving wages is repeated in 1 Timothy 5:18. So the phrase “a worker is worthy of his wages,” takes on the nature of a proverb, i.e., a general truth in labor relations that would include someone in Paul’s situation. The Seventy were commanded in a way that Paul was not. He had a freedom of choice that they did not have during their mission that started in Luke 10:1 and ended in Luke 10:17.

Paul seems to be saying that as the proverb said, “every worker is worthy of being paid for his work.” Paul then suggests that in general everyone agreed with that principle, but his critics were making an exception when it applied to Paul.

1 Corinthians 9:15-18, Paul’s example

Having firmly established the fact that as an apostle, or one working for the gospel, Paul could reasonably claim to possess certain rights. He now shows that he had not exercised those rights. His purpose is to give weight to his call to the Corinthians to willingly give up things that they might have claimed were rightfully theirs.

In short, everything said in verses 1-14 was laying a foundation for what he says in verses 15-18. He now states what he presents as an example for the Corinthians to follow if they were properly concerned for each other’s spiritual health.

10. Four times Paul introduces a statement with the word “for,” indicating his reason for doing certain things. What are those four reasons?

1. V. 15, “for” he would rather die than give up his reason to boast.
2. V 16a, “for” if he preached, he had nothing of which to boast.
3. V. 16b, “for” he did some things by necessity.
4. V 17, “for” he would be rewarded for what he did willingly.

11. What was Paul compelled to do?

Preach the gospel. From the moment of his call on the road to Damascus he was obliged to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Not everyone has received such a specific mission from the Lord, but Paul certainly did and could not faithfully forsake it.

12. What did Paul do willingly?

Preach without receiving direct financial support from some congregations where he preached, such as in Corinth. Since God had given him a mission, he couldn't claim any credit for following orders, but he could take credit for voluntarily declining support in Corinth. He would not normally have "boasted" of his sacrifice, but he does here for the purpose of giving weight to his call to all Christians to sacrifice personal rights for the spiritual benefit of our brethren.

13. In what way was Paul rewarded for declining the financial support of the Corinthians.

He apparently found a certain personal satisfaction in the fact. Especially in the case that he could deny having taken financial profit from this church where some were critical of his work.

14. What was the abuse of authority that Paul feared, and what did he do to prevent that "abuse"?

In Corinth, he determined that to receive Corinthian support while in that city would be an obstacle to the spread of the gospel. He did not want his means of support to have any negative impact on his ministry. That, he felt, would be an abusive exercise of his authority.

Even if he received support from other churches, he did not want that to be viewed as a fee that he charged.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23, The principle explained and applied

Paul has claimed his rights and has explained that for the good of the gospel he has not exercised those rights. He now explains how this voluntary decision has left him free – not free to make a self-centered use of his rights, but rather free to lay his rights aside in voluntary service to all.

15. If Paul had accepted support from the Corinthians, how might that have complicated his ministry to that congregation? Remember that there were rival factions in the congregation. How did being free from obligations to any group (especially financial obligations) allow him to better serve all of them?

Considering the rivalries and jealousy between factions, if Paul had been financially beholden to any group, he would easily have been suspected of bias by the other groups. Paul was obligated to Christ only, and that gave him both credibility and freedom of action.

16. Since Jewish law originally came from God, to follow Jewish customs when in the presence of Jews would not normally have led Paul to engage in any ungodly practices. That would not be the case when “connecting” with Gentile audiences. What does Paul say that shows that there were limits to how far he could go in “relating” to any group? In other words, how could Paul become as the weak if the weak are doing sinful things (as the weak tend to do)?

He was free from the Old Testament law, and free from whatever religious law Gentiles followed, but he was still “under law toward Christ.” In other words, he wasn’t claiming total freedom from ethical and religious standards. A Christian, as we often say, lives under grace, but is still called to obedience to the gospel.

While he could adapt to different groups, that didn’t mean he went to brothels to relate to those who did, nor did he get drunk to gain superficial credibility with drunkards. He was, however, free from non-Christian religious laws and customs. He didn’t sin to appear “authentic” to his audiences. If the customs were not themselves sinful, he could participate or not – it made no difference to him.

This section is not about the freedom to do whatever he felt like doing. It is about not doing all that he had freedom to do if his restraint would help others grow in their faith. See 8:9-13.

17. Other than the fact that he wasn’t bound to follow any group’s customs (“free from all”), what was the clear and sole goal of Paul’s adaptability?

He states this single goal several times in various ways:

- a. “lest we hinder the gospel of Christ,” v. 12.
- b. That he might win “those who are under the law,” or “those who are without law,” v. 21.
- c. “That I might by all means save some,” v. 22.

His goal was never self-expression or self-indulgence, but the freedom to do what was best for his salvation and that of others. His was the freedom to serve.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Personal self-discipline

In this paragraph, Paul seems to shift to a new topic, but that is not really the case. He is merely presenting a different mixed metaphor (running and boxing) to promote the same idea from a different angle.

Paul's athletic analogy contains some details that should not be pressed too far because they function to fill out the illustration, but are not a part of the actual message. E.g., all Christians can be saved. Salvation is not a competition where only one wins the prize.

18. What feature does Paul highlight that is common to both runners and boxers and contributes to their receiving the prize? How does this idea fit into this concluding statement that presents the overall message of chapter 9? What is the prize that should guide everything we do?

Christians are called to self-control as we focus on the prize of salvation that is the goal of the gospel. Not exercising every right we might have in order to help others grow in faith depends on sacrificial self-discipline.

Eternal salvation is the main goal. Whatever our freedoms, whatever our talents, whatever ministries interest us as individuals or as churches, all must serve the goal of eternal salvation. We should not let our abilities, activities or rights distract us from that one overriding eternal goal.