

“SURRENDERING PERSONAL RIGHTS & FREEDOMS”
1 CORINTHIANS 9:1-23

Apart from your faith, your family, and your friends, I bet I could identify the two things you value most in life. It is not your house, your job, your farm, your automobile, or any other material possession. They are two things you cannot see or touch. Yet try and take them away from you and I dare say you'd put up a fight.

I'm referring to your personal *rights* and *freedoms*. You cherish your rights and freedoms so much that you will protect and preserve them at any cost. They are things for which you are willing to fight, to bleed, and perhaps even to die.

On the other hand, *slavery*, having *no* personal rights and freedoms, is the thing we despise most. For some of us, having a boss is bad enough. But having a master? Yikes! We shudder at the thought of being under the *control* of someone who determines what we do and how we act and spend our time; who may disregard our desires or needs.

Some of us would rather die than be a slave. Surely no one would *choose* to be a slave...or would he? Paul made an astonishing statement in the passage we are going to be looking at this morning. In 1 Corinthians 9:19 he says, “*Though I am free and belong to no man, yet I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible*” (NIV). What did Paul mean by this statement? Why would he make such a sacrifice? And what relevance and application do these words have for us?

Let's explore the entire passage, which begins in **verses 1-2**. “*Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? ² 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.*”

An apostle had a great deal of honor, authority, and responsibility in the early church. An apostle was the church's version of a *VIP*. *VIPs* typically have certain entitlements. They often get red carpet treatment. People bend over backwards for them, giving them special privileges or perks. This happened when the Apostle Peter or the Apostle James visited churches outside of Jerusalem where they lived.

But Paul did not allow the churches he worked with to treat him like a *VIP*, which, in Corinth, cast doubt on his qualifications for being a genuine apostle. He didn't look or act like their perception of an apostle; he seemed too ordinary, too much like one of them.

In the first century there were many traveling teachers and philosophers who went from city to city giving lectures and holding public forums, just like Paul. They supported themselves by either charging admission fees, staying in well-to-do households, or working at a trade.

Working at a trade was the least common because the work itself was time-consuming and wearisome and left little time and energy for teaching. But more importantly, it called into question the credibility of the teacher. You see, Greeks despised manual labor. No *free* Greek would ever *willingly* work with his hands (that's what slaves were for), and those who *did* work with their hands were considered unintelligent, unimportant, and not worth listening to.

When Paul came into Corinth one of the first things he did was set up shop as a tent maker so that he could support himself in the ministry and not be financially dependent on anyone. So, during the day he made tents, and on weekends and evenings he taught and preached and planted a church.

Some people thought Paul's manual labor diluted his authority and credibility and cast doubt on his authenticity as a bona fide apostle. That's why Paul defended himself in these verses. He is trying to prove to them that he really was a genuine apostle, for two reasons. First, he had *seen* Jesus. He had encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus during his conversion experience, and then Jesus had also appeared to him in a vision while he was staying in Corinth (Acts 18:9-10). Seeing Jesus was considered a qualification for being an apostle.

Second, Paul's labor in the Lord had produced real results. The radical transformation that had occurred in the lives of the Corinthians who had put their faith in Christ proved that Paul's apostleship was genuine. Paul says in verse 2, "*You are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.*"

So, if, in fact, Paul was a true apostle of Christ, it meant that he possessed certain entitlements that came with that position. Look at **verses 3-6**. "*³ This is my defense to those who would examine me. ⁴ Do we not have the right to eat and drink? ⁵ 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? ⁶ Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?*"

Paul addressed three of his legitimate rights and freedoms. First, he had the right to live at the church's expense. That is, he had the right to insist that the church feed him and take care of his temporal needs. Churches happily did this when Peter and James came to town and stayed for a few weeks or months, and it was the right thing to do. As an apostle, Paul was

entitled to the same kind of treatment, and it certainly would have made his life easier. But Paul surrendered this right and paid his own expenses.

Secondly, as an apostle Paul had the right to be married. Peter and James and some of the other apostles were married, and those marriages provided many comforts and benefits for them. Paul could have made his life easier by marrying a believing spouse. But he surrendered his right to be married in order to be more focused in his ministry.

Finally, as an apostle Paul was entitled to be compensated for his work of preaching and teaching, just as Peter and James and some of the other apostles were compensated. Paul goes on to defend this right by giving some examples from the work world. Look at **verse 7**, “*⁷ Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?*” The answer is “no one.” The government pays a soldier’s expenses.

“*Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit?*” No one. A farmer is entitled to eat however much of his crop he wants whenever he wants.

“*Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?*” Again, no one. A thirsty dairy man has every right to dip his cup into his pail of milk and take a drink. He can drink the whole pail if he wants and no one would bat an eye. That’s his right.

But there is also *Scriptural* precedence for being compensated for God’s work. **Verses 8-10**. “*⁸ Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? ⁹ 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? ¹⁰ 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.*”

Now, here’s the point. **Verses 11-12a**. “*¹¹ If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? ¹² If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?*”

In defending his right to be compensated for his ministerial work among the Corinthians, Paul reminds them he had spent more time with them and invested more energy than any other apostle. Thus, it would have been perfectly appropriate for him to insist on being paid. But he didn’t, **verse 12b**. “*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.*”

The word that is translated in my version “to endure anything” is a word that literally means “to endure in silence.” In other words, Paul and Barnabus

didn't even bring up the subject of money to the Corinthians because they didn't want them to suspect that they were in the ministry for money. They didn't want to do anything that might divert their attention from Jesus and His message. Because if people suspect that a person is preaching for profit or personal gain, he has lost their trust, forfeited his authority and credibility in their eyes, and, what's worse, the authority and credibility of his message.

Paul reinforces his argument in the next few verses. **Verse 13.** *"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 the sacrificial offerings?"* In the Books of Leviticus and Numbers there are lengthy and detailed instructions about how those who worked in the Tabernacle and Temple should be compensated, and God made sure they were compensated well because their work was important and God did not want them to be distracted by worrying about their daily needs.

But that's not all, **verse 14,** *"¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel."* Jesus himself commanded that preachers and teachers of the gospel be compensated for their work. According to Jesus, it was a ministerial right.

However, Paul says in **verses 15-18,** *"¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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! ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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."*

Though Paul had the right to get paid for his ministerial work and though it would have been perfectly appropriate to exercise that right, he chose to surrender it because he did not want to be seen as a freeloader or a money grubber.

And he felt so strongly about it that he said he would rather die than insist on getting paid to preach. Preaching the gospel was something he had a compulsion to do, not only because of what it had done to and for *him*—transforming him from a gospel-hating, Christ-loathing Pharisee into a gospel loving, Christ adoring follower—but because Christ Himself had personally commissioned him to preach the gospel, and he felt so honored to be

assigned this task and so indebted to the One who assigned him, that he was determined to preach it free of charge.

But Paul goes on to say that there was something besides the inherent power of the Gospel and his commission to preach it that compelled him to surrender his legitimate rights and privileges. It was the very people to whom he was sent to preach. Look at **verse 19**. “¹⁹ *For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.*”

Notice, Paul *made himself* a servant. This was a choice. He *voluntarily* surrendered his rights and freedoms to become a servant. And not just a servant to some, but to all. *All* means everyone, even people with whom he did not agree, people who were less spiritually enlightened and less spiritually mature than he was, people who had poor theology and wrong interpretations of the Bible.

When Paul was with such people, he did not come across as a know-it-all, or try to prove that he was right and they were wrong, or assert his personal convictions, or insist that people think like him or do things his way. He *deferred* to them. He *accommodated* them. He got on their level and adapted to their convictions and ways of thinking and doing things. His theme song was *not*, “I Did it My Way,” but “I’ll Do it Your Way.” And he did these things for one reason. So that nothing about him would get in the way of people being receptive to the gospel and won to Christ. “*That I might win more of them.*”

Paul gave several examples of how he did this. **Verse 20a**. “²⁰ *To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews.*” Of course, Paul was a Jew, born into a Jewish family, brought up with Jewish customs and traditions, and educated in Jewish schools. So, Paul cannot be referring to *ethnicity* here. Rather, he’s referring to the religious and cultural customs and conventions of Judaism. Although Paul was raised with these customs and conventions, he had become a follower of the One who came to fulfill and then abolish many of them.

As a Christian Paul was no longer required to follow certain laws or perform certain rituals. Christ had set him free from those things. But in becoming a slave to Jews, Paul observed those laws and participated in those customs and conventions *when he was in the presence of Jews*. And he did this in order to win them to the One who could set *them* free as well. He didn’t want anything about *him* to get in the way of letting them see Jesus and responding to him.

What would these Jews think about Jesus if Paul had *no* regard for their laws and customs and traditions? How would they respond if Paul would have said, “Hey you guys, this thing you’re doing doesn’t mean anything anymore. It’s just an empty ritual and a waste of time?” They would have tuned Paul out. They would have told Paul to take a hike. Because you don’t barge in and criticize the religion that people hold so dear. That’s the way to alienate them from you...and Christ.

But there is more, **verse 20b**, “*...to those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.*”

This group is probably a narrower sect within the Jewish community—the *religious right*, we might call them. People who not only lived by God’s law, but by some very strict interpretations of God’s law that went beyond what God intended. Paul knew that their adherence to these interpretations was extreme and unnecessary. But that’s because these people hadn’t yet been set free by Christ. And when Paul was with them, he was willing to sacrifice his own freedoms and follow their cumbersome rules in order to gain their confidence so that they might be won to Christ.

Yes, accommodating these extremists restricted his lifestyle! It limited his options! It curtailed his enjoyment of some of the legitimate pleasures to which he was entitled. But Paul was willing to sacrifice these things because he didn’t want anything about *him* preventing them from seeing Jesus and responding to him.

Verse 21. “²¹ *To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.*” “Those outside the law” are Gentiles (former pagans) who were unacquainted with God’s directives in the Law of Moses. For example, they didn’t have any qualms about eating food that wasn’t Kosher, and so when Paul was with them, he didn’t either. They’d serve him bacon and eggs, he’d eat it, enjoy it, and not say anything about it. He wasn’t compromising. God didn’t forbid it, and neither did his conscience. And so, he would adapt to the customs and traditions of their culture, and by so doing hoped that they would be won to Christ.

Paul mentions one final group of people in the first part of **verse 22a**. “²² *To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.*” The weak are those who have consciences that are stricter than the Bible. Paul talked about the weak in chapter 8 when addressing the issue of whether or not it

was okay to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

Having a weak conscience is not a sin. It's just restrictive in many ways. What makes this matter an ethical issue is whether or not a weak person violates his conscience by doing something he's not fully convinced is right. In that case, he *is* sinning.

On the other hand, the moral issue for those with strong consciences is whether or not, by exercising their freedom, they cause the weak person to stumble. If they do, then *they* are sinning.

So, what's the solution? Paul already said at the end of chapter 8 that those who are strong ought to surrender their freedom for the sake of those who are weak. And to do it willingly, without complaining or holding a grudge. That's how you make yourself a slave. You refrain from saying or doing anything that would cause unnecessary offense or disturbance.

In this case, when Paul was in the company of the weak, he had his eggs *without* bacon. In fact, if bacon prevented them from seeing Jesus and responding to him, he'd never eat another strip.

These are examples of what it means and what it looks like to become a slave to others. It means giving up your legitimate rights and freedoms that may be misinterpreted or may be offensive, so that nothing about you will prevent others from seeing Jesus and responding to him.

Now, Paul is going to emphatically restate the principle in **verses 22b-23**. *"I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings."*

In our culture, when we hear someone say, "I want to be all things to all people," we accuse them of not being true to themselves. We assume that they are either insecure and wanting people's approval, or we think they are manipulative. We accuse politicians of trying to be all things to all men in order to try and win their votes, and it's one of the reasons we *don't* have much respect for politicians.

But Paul had an entirely different reason for making this resolution. Yes, he had an ulterior motive, but that motive was an expression of extreme love. Paul bent over backwards for others, so that others might bend their knee to Christ. Paul gave up his earthly freedoms, so that others might be eternally free. Paul lived for others so that others might live forever.

If, when you think of the Apostle Paul, you think of some stuffy theologian in an ivory tower who waxed eloquent on subjects like

predestination and the hypostatic union, you've misread the New Testament. Paul was a man who first and foremost loved Jesus first, and then others, including the lost. He loved them so much he said in Romans that he would be willing to be damned forever in hell if it meant his countrymen could go to heaven instead.

That's called love, and Paul was possessed and consumed by that love, a love that would compel him to deny himself and surrender his rights and freedoms for the spiritual benefit of others. And this was his pattern for his entire life as a servant of Christ. Listen to what he said in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, "I consider my life worth *nothing* to me..." I couldn't care less about my personal rights, entitlements, dreams, bucket lists, PTO, pensions, freedoms, etc. I only care about "finishing the race and completing the task the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace" (Acts 20:24).

Why? I assure you it wasn't because the act of preaching the gospel itself was so exhilarating. It's because the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of those who believe (Rom. 1:16). Paul denied himself and surrendered his rights and freedoms so that, by all means, he might save some.

Which raises a couple of questions. Why *would* or *could* Paul have such great love for the lost? The answer is simpler than you might think. It was evidence of who he was in Christ. Jesus had made him this way when he became a follower of Christ and was made a new creation in Christ. It was part of Paul's new nature in Christ. Last week Pastor Grant told us that when we put our faith in Christ and become His followers, we become *new* people who have been given *new* desires and a *new* destiny. Paul's extreme love was an expression of his identity in Christ. It was Christ's love displayed through him by the Holy Spirit who lived in him. In other words, Paul was simply being who Christ had made him. Jesus had given him *His* heart for people.

But please don't think that Paul was unusual in this way. Don't think that he loved people like this or had this intense passion for the lost because he was on a different spiritual plane than you or me, or that he was some spiritual super-hero who had extraordinary powers and exceptional abilities. He simply had Christ, and he had the Holy Spirit—the same Christ we have and the same Holy Spirit who is living in you and me. And just to show you that we also are capable and expected to have the same love, the same passions,

the same priorities, and the same ability to surrender our rights and freedoms, Paul said in 1 Cor. 11:1, “Be imitators of me, even as I am of Christ.”

You also ought to surrender your rights and freedoms, just like I have. And for one reason. Because that’s what Christ did. This summarizes Jesus’ life and mission. Paul said in Philippians 2, *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves...Having this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. But emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...humbling himself and becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*

Christlikeness is about selflessness, humility, sacrifice, surrender. And being a disciple of Christ is the same. Jesus said, *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross* (which means ‘die to himself’) *and follow me”* (Mark 8:34).

Brothers and sisters, do you have rights that you cherish? Fine. Do you have entitlements? Good for you. You probably earned them. Are you a VIP? Congratulations. But Jesus and Paul would say, “Those things are not a big deal in your life on this earth, and they certainly do not determine who you are or how you should relate to other people. You are first and foremost a servant of Christ who possesses His nature which gives you the capacity to deny and die to yourself and put Jesus and others first. It also gives you the capacity to love people so much that you want to make sure nothing about you gets in the way of them seeing Jesus and responding to him.”

That’s the normal Christian life.

Main Idea: Though Paul had rights as a genuine apostle, he surrendered them so that nothing would get in the way of people seeing Jesus and responding to him.

Application:

Paul was simply living out his identity of being “in Christ”.

We are capable of and expected to be like Paul with regard to surrendering our rights and freedoms.

(“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” I Corinthians 11:1)

Application Questions

“Surrendering Personal Rights & Freedoms”

I Corinthians 9:1-23

Main Idea: Though Paul had rights as a genuine apostle, he surrendered them so that nothing would get in the way of people seeing Jesus and responding to him.

1. Name three or four of your most cherished rights, entitlements, or freedoms. Why do you value them? How difficult would it be for you to surrender them?
2. Why is surrendering our rights and freedoms for the sake of others (putting their needs, interests, desires, etc. before our own) so difficult from a natural standpoint?
3. If we have the same capability of loving others like Paul, how do we ensure that we are “possessed and consumed” by that love, just as he was?

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