



Where's Your Boast?" – 1 Corinthians 9:1-18

Have you ever seen this: A toy is taken away from a child and the child immediately screams. It can be exhausting to parent with multiple little children around because I believe every child is born with this innate sense of “fair” or “rightness” or “justice.” I’d probably be a millionaire if I received a nickel for every time I heard “No fair!” The problem is that children often aren’t concerned about justice as much as they care about how they individually are being treated. They’ll be unjust in their treatment of others, but if someone does something to them, “How dare they!”

Before we walk away judging all the children around us as though they’re the heathens and we’re superior, I actually believe we adults do the same things – but maybe we just hide it better. But then again, maybe we don’t hide it well. It seems even many adults aren’t past this self-centered sense of justice, and I think we who profess to follow in Jesus’ footsteps are probably in the same boat as well. I can’t help but wonder if we focus more on our *rights* than we do the gospel. For some of us, we may not see a difference between the two. Doesn’t the gospel give me rights and freedoms? But if we think this way, we are going to come up with problems like that found in Corinth. And in the text we’re studying today, we see that if we focus on our rights more than the gospel, we will skew a picture of Jesus and the gospel to fellow Christians and also the world around us.

This nasty tendency to be overly concerned with “my rights” rears its ugly head when we hear the final words of Paul in chapter 8: **¹³Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.** ¹ Right there I think we all have questions. We may think, “Really?! *Never eat meat?* I mean, c’mon, Paul. This is crazy. People need to get over their issues and just know that I have the right to do that. I mean, it’s just not fair that I should have to limit myself for them.” We can relate to this, right? People within our church family believe it’s right to wear masks while others don’t find a purpose. How do we respond? Let’s first recall Devon’s message where he highlights Paul referring to people as the ones for whom Christ died. How would that phrase affect your communication with others if you said, “Christ died for them?” Am I loving them like Christ loved them or am I acting more like Satan, the accuser?

But you still say, “But what about my rights?” You know, in governments of this world, I believe it’s right to talk about human rights and inalienable rights. But within the church, we must function on a higher plane because if we only function on the basis of rights, we only focus on the Law and then how people ought to be punished or prized. But ultimately, if we first look at our rights our primary focus is still on us – me and you. Therefore, if our starting point is our rights then we’ll always come to the wrong conclusion with how we ought to live as Christians.

So, what’s the correct starting point? Here in chapter 9, Paul gives himself as an example of how they ought to think about their rights. He shows that our starting point must be the gospel of Jesus. Again, he’s showing that to glorify God we must live on the basis of Jesus and him crucified. If we have this mindset, we won’t argue for our personal rights. We’ll instead want to display in our words and actions the gospel of Jesus. And, if we live this way, we will be not only be just and right in our actions towards

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 8:13.

others, but we will be loving because we will point people to the saving message of Jesus. Do you want to live this way or do you simply want to get in an argument over your rights?

As we begin our trek through these 18 verses, I think the main point of Paul is that **A believer's supreme right is to boast in the gospel.** While Paul speaks of himself as an apostle and shares how he acts as one, he is doing this in order to show his relatability with the Corinthians. They will say, "What about my rights?" And Paul's response is, "What about my rights?" And he then reveals a greater way of living. Let's now dive into the text to see this glorious truth that our supreme right is to boast in the gospel. Read with me verses 1-2 again: Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? ²If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. ²

Paul is going to focus on his rights as an apostle in these first 18 verses. Then he's going to focus on the issue of freedom beginning in verse 19. So, in bringing up his apostleship, he's essentially asking, "Am I an apostle? Do I have blessings? Therefore, doesn't he have great rights as an apostle?" The answer is a resounding yes. Verse 2 might seem confusing, but keep it in context. There are people who don't think he's an apostle, but the Corinthians do believe he is one. And they're right. So, as an apostle, he has rights. This connects with chapter 8 because Paul would say that he has a right to eat the meat, but he's declining the right. He says this because the Corinthians ought to decline their right as well.

We know he's making this connection with chapter 8 because of what comes next in verses 3-14. Paul gives five reasons as to why he has *rights* as an apostle. And then in verses 15-18, he's going to reveal that these rights don't give him the freedom to live in those rights. Instead, he's going to give the reason why he's constrained to lay down the rights. So, if we want to talk about rights, let's listen to Paul's defense for why he has rights. He shows us that we could even have chapter and verses to argue for our rights and why we can do this or that thing. Paul's going to do that here – and yet these rights will be laid aside because of a superior right in the gospel. So, what are the five reasons?

Paul's Defense of His Actions on the Basis of His Rights:

Ordinary Practice. Let's start with verses 3-7. Read these verses again: ³This is my defense to those who would examine me. ⁴Do we not have the right to eat and drink? ⁵Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? ⁷Who 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?³ Verse 3 starts with Paul making a "defense." This is a legal term. What's he defending? Answer: the laying down of his rights. So, to those who think he's absolutely ridiculous for laying down his rights, here's his argument for doing so.

This is immensely important for all of us. Let's talk about our rights, but let's do so in order to then talk about laying them down for the sake of God's glory and other's good. It may sound ridiculous – and honestly, in a society like ours many will think we are ridiculous for laying down our rights. This would have been similar in Corinth as well – a city that the self-made man was elevated, a city where people fought to climb the ladder of success in order to be seen as a somebody, a city that was started by many former slaves. And Paul does the opposite of them. He, a free Roman citizen embraces his submission to

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:1–2.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:3–7.

Christ as a slave of Jesus and shows that there's greater freedom in being enslaved to Christ than in being free in the world's eyes!

So, verses 4-7 move on. Paul talks about his rights and uses ordinary practice as an argument for his rights to do various things. As an apostle, doesn't he have the right to eat and drink? This goes back to the temple sacrifices and eating meat offered to idols. As Devon helped us last week to realize, people in Corinth believed spirits could come out of the meat itself! Yet, Paul knows this wouldn't be the case at all. So, isn't he free to eat that meat? Isn't he free to drink the beverages? These are rhetorical questions. Of course he is. He has that right. What about marriage? The other apostles are free to marry. What about Paul? Well, if the apostles are free to marry, then Paul would be free to do so as well, right? Of course.

Now, there is one note that I need to add here. I've already spoken with David about this, but I told him that I was going to seek to graciously disagree with his position that he preached a couple weeks ago. While practically, we would both counsel a believer to only marry a believer, he stated in his message that he believes it unwise but not necessarily a sin. I would say it is a sin. This is a great opportunity for all of us to seek the Scriptures to see what God actually says. But another reason why I think it's a sin is because of what Paul says here with regards to freedom to marry. He doesn't simply say that he's free to marry. He asks whether or not he has the freedom to marry a believing spouse. The freedom is not to marry anyone he wants. The freedom is to marry a believer. If someone says, "Well, he's an apostle. The standard is higher," remember that Paul says that leaders are to be an example of the believer. And Paul is writing all this here as an example to *relate* to the Corinthians. In addition, in Paul's writings he often makes a point and then emphasizes it again later in his writings. That's what I think he's doing here as well. He's spoken of marriage and food in the last couple chapters. He's bringing both issues up here and applying them to himself. Does he have the freedom? Yes!

Paul now moves to a new issue for personal rights: receiving money for work in gospel ministry. Does he and Barnabas have the freedom to receive money from the Corinthians? Yes. And this is where we get to the argument from ordinary practice. He uses illustrations from military, tending a vineyard, and shepherding. Does a soldier fight at his own expense? No. Does a person tend a vineyard and not partake of his work while working? No. Does a shepherd not receive milk from the flock he's tending? No! Even the world functions this way. Therefore, the ordinary practice of Paul and Barnabas should lead people to believe they should receive money for the ministry they're accomplishing in Corinth. Now, Paul moves to a second reason for his rights:

Scriptural precedent. Let's read verses 8-10: ⁸Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? ⁹For 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? ¹⁰Does 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.⁴

Ok, so he just made an argument from the world's perspective. We're on shaky ground if we only use the world as an example. So, Paul says in verse 8, "Am I only using human authority for my rights?" By the way, I wonder how many people in America turn to their favored News channel or the Bill of Rights to be their grounding for rights *more than* the Scriptures themselves. While we can learn from the world, we need to know what the Bible says. So, Paul goes to the Scriptures. He quotes from

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:8–10.

Deuteronomy 24 and uses a somewhat odd passage. When an ox is doing his job, don't muzzle it. Why? Because the ox will do better if he has food while he's working. Paul then asks, "Is God only concerned about the ox? We could say it another way, "Does God care more for oxen than people?" If we can apply this to oxen, why can't we apply this principle to people? And actually, we can. Deuteronomy 24 is filled with laws relating to how we care for others, including oxen. So, Paul is right in applying this to workers of the gospel. In the field of God, he has many workers. God has ordained to have his workers be fed while they're working. This includes apostles! So, ordinary practice and the Scriptures align. Now, Paul moves to the argument of

Common sense. In verses 11-12, Paul writes, "¹¹If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? ¹²If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?"⁵ Paul argues from lesser to greater. Put it in modern terminology. If you'd pay someone to detail your car or if you'd pay a financial advisor, why would you not help someone who has given themselves to your spiritual livelihood? I mean, what does it matter if you gain the world and lose your soul? Paul has given himself to help the people to see and savor Jesus – and he's given himself to help them know how to live out the gospel so that they might magnify the Lord in all things. If you understand the value of God and the value of obeying the Lord. If you know that the Lord has placed workers in his vineyard to give their lives full-time to helping others follow the Lord, then common sense even tells you that those workers have a right to receive the blessing of financial care. You'd do it for others. Why not them? Now, Paul moves to his next point:

Religious custom. Look at verse 13: ¹³Do 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?⁶ I believe Paul is speaking to the Corinthians about both the Jewish and Greek system of worships. Anyone who works fully in the temple is paid. So, these customs and traditions emphasize that Paul himself has the right to receive remuneration. Finally, we have the fifth reason:

Jesus' teaching. Verse 14 says, "In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel."⁷ Like in earlier chapters, when Paul is speaking of the Lord, he's referencing Jesus specifically. In Matthew 10:10, Jesus says that the "laborer deserves his food." In that context, he's emphasizing to his followers that they will be cared for in the midst of their ministry. So, let's get back to Paul's defense of rights. Does Paul have the *right* to receive financial care from the Corinthians? Yes! He doesn't just have one reason to claim this right. He has five reasons. Whether physical, spiritual, biblical, religious, he has reasons! In similar ways, we can do the same thing and say, "See! Jesus says this or that. The Bible declares this thing over there. People in other context do this. Therefore, I have the right!" But Paul does something shocking. He reveals that his "right" isn't the lynchpin in making decisions. His "right" must submit to the greater call of the gospel. That means that your rights must always submit to the gospel, too.

Look at the end of verse 12 and also verse 15 with me: **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.**^{8 15} **But I**

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:11–12.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:13.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:14.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:12.

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.⁹

In verse 12, Paul states that neither he nor Barnabas have made use of this right. Just because you have a right doesn't mean you *ought* to make use of it. Instead, Paul believed that in his ministry to the Gentiles, receiving financial remuneration would have put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. Why would it have done this? First, he's in a Gentile world with a new message. By the way, Paul didn't always decline financial care. He received money from the churches, but it seems he never received money from the new areas he was in. While he was ministry to new areas, he raised his own support through his own work or he received from other churches where he had a relationship. He didn't want there to be an obstacle to the gospel message. He didn't want people saying, "Oh, he's just in this for the money." Or, in Corinth, I imagine he didn't want any patrons thinking they could pay for his message. How quickly people even today can think these ways about religious leaders. And, honestly, there are many who are in it for the money. But Paul doesn't preach the gospel as a job. The point of his life isn't money. The point of his life is the gospel. Therefore, he says in verse 15 that he currently has made no use of these rights. And he isn't stating these rights in order for the Corinthians to feel bad and give him money! His point in writing out the "rights" was to show them how they ought to lay down their rights as well.

So, you could argue how to live your life by starting with your rights. Or, you could give a defense for how you live your life starting with the gospel of Jesus. And that's what Paul does in verses 15-18. Let's begin reading at the end of verse 15: 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. ¹⁰

Paul's Defense on the Basis of the Gospel:

Paul is defending his actions on the basis of the gospel. He gives at least three brief reasons the gospel gives for denying his rights in his ministry to the Gentiles:

His ability to boast (v. 15b). "I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting." That's a strong statement. Paul lives for true joy. This is why the title of the sermon is "Where's your boast?" Do you boast in your rights? When people hear your speech and watch your actions, do they think, "This person is just so focused on their rights? They're like a child who constantly says, 'No fair!'" Or, do people say, "In their words and actions, they boast in Jesus. They deny their rights so that we can see Christ more clearly." Yes, that may look stupid, but we know that the foolish message of the cross is the wisdom of God. Paul says he'd rather die than not be able to boast in the gospel.

This gospel must truly be glorious if he'd lay down those five reasons for boasting. So, what is the gospel? The gospel is a message that cuts through rights and gives us grace! The reality is that if I argued for my rights with God, I'd be in Hell today. My sinfulness and your sinfulness deserves eternal punishment because the sin is against the Eternal God. And yet, instead of declaring all to Hell, Jesus (God the Son) came to this earth and became a new representative for human beings. He didn't simply do what was his right. On the cross, he had the rights to call all the angels of heaven to rescue him and

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:15.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:15–18.

wage war against humanity, but he laid down his rights as God and as the Perfect Man, and he suffered the punishment sinners deserved. Then God has declared that anyone who turns to him on the basis of Jesus will be forgiven. God doesn't accept us because we earned his acceptance, but because Jesus accomplished everything. This is grace. But you say, "Why would I want God?" Answer: Because God made you for him, to know him, to be reconciled to him. He is the fountainhead of all good and all glorious things! He himself is glory. Have you trusted in Christ? Call out to him right now, if you haven't. Ask him to rescue you and reconcile you to God. He doesn't save you because you're sorry enough or godly enough but because Jesus is enough! What a reason for boasting!

Paul says he'd rather die than not boast in Jesus. Do you have that mindset of Jesus or do you love boasting in your rights more? Oh, the gospel frees us to delight in boasting in Jesus and not our rights! Paul then argues from

Gospel stewardship (vv. 16-17). Paul just said he'd rather die than not be able to boast. Then, in verse 16 he says if he preaches the gospel, he can't boast. Wait. Does he want to boast or does he not want to boast? Yes! The question relates to what he wants to boast in! Does he want to boast in himself and his rights or does he want to boast in Jesus and the gospel? He wants to boast in Jesus and the gospel. So, he speaks of his stewardship here. A steward is a slave entrusted with great care. Depending on their master, they could have great power and freedom. Paul is a steward of the greater Master who owns all. The same is true for all of us who have trusted Jesus! We are stewards as well. You have a great Master – and it is our privilege to magnify the Master! Our boasting is found in him, not in us. So, Paul says that if he preaches the gospel, he doesn't boast in himself! This is the crazy thing I've found at times with people where they'll compliment me and how great I am for preaching the gospel. Listen, I have greater joy if you walk away from the sermon rejoicing in God than if you are rejoicing in me! If you rejoice in me, you've missed the point. Paul didn't choose his calling. Necessity is laid on him. God called him to this. Therefore, if he doesn't proclaim the gospel, "Woe to him." He pronounces God's wrath on him if he doesn't do what God called him to do. This doesn't mean he believes he can lose his salvation, but he is emphasizing the seriousness of the call. Therefore, in verse 17, Paul says that if he aligns with God's will and preaches with a heart for God's glory, he has a reward. But if he does it reluctantly, God has still given him this stewardship. All-in-all, Paul says that the point isn't him. The point is his Master! He lives to make the Master known, and he believes that if he takes money from people in new areas, it will create an obstacle to them being able to see the majesty of Jesus and the glories of God. So, there's something greater than his rights: God himself and finally, a reward.

A Reward (v. 18). Ok, what's the reward of laying down the rights? Is it a bigger mansion in heaven with more gold? Listen to what Paul says in verse 18: ¹⁸What 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. ¹¹

If your heart isn't moved and motivated by the gospel, you won't see this as a reward, but if you love the Lord, you'll resonate with this. The reward is the privilege of preaching the gospel free of charge and *not* living on the basis of my rights. Now, Paul isn't saying it's wrong for other apostles to not receive money. He himself receives money. The point is laying down his rights. The reward is the freedom to live on the basis of the grace found in the gospel, and to not live on the basis of my rights. That's a reward in and of itself. Gospel obedience is a reward in and of itself.

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:18.

Have you ever had situations in your life where you've been amazed by your obedience to the Lord? Maybe you've spoken to others and said, "There's no way I could have done that without the power of the Lord!" You rejoiced. This is what Paul is saying here. But guess what? If you live on the basis of "rights" you won't rejoice. You'll always be trying to tally up scores of how people treated you and how you can get out of serving others. You'll say, "I have the right to eat that meat or do this or that thing." Then you miss out on the stewardship God has given to you as a minister of the gospel. So, what's the application for you.

First, if you don't know Jesus, I pray you would turn to him. If you have questions, talk to someone about what it means to be a follower of the Lord. Second, if you boast in your rights more than the gospel, repent. Take time to do an exercise like Paul. Write down your rights. Then write down how the gospel of Jesus frees you to live on the basis of grace not your rights. This means, thirdly, that you'll need to dig further into the Word to see how the gospel ought to shape your mindset, rehearsing how it even shapes your identity as a steward of the Master. **A believer's supreme right is to boast in the gospel.** I pray God shapes our hearts to do just this. By his grace, all of his children can and will grow in these ways, and when we live this way, we will serve the world in such radical ways that more will come to faith in Christ and their lives will be changed. This is where Paul's going in this chapter and we will see more of this next week.

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