

The Gospel Free of Charge - *1 Corinthians 9*

Introduction

- Last week we started to look at what Scripture has to say about our rights, and our willingness to sacrifice certain rights in order to care for one another.
- And I think if we're honest, this is a pretty challenging topic for a lot of us, isn't it? Because what we see the Bible teaching about this is so different from the attitude we see in the world around us.
- Our world and our culture operates on a kind of "look out for #1" system. You do what's best for you. You have a right to do what you want, and if that bothers people, that's there problem. No one has a right to tell you what you can, and can't do. That's the attitude we see being encouraged all around us, and its an attitude that we often use to justify whatever we're doing, regardless of the impact it has on those around us.
- Yet the attitude of our world is so different from the attitude we find in Scripture on this topic.
- What we looked at last week in 1 Corinthians 8 was not a "me first, look out for #1 attitude". It was a "look out for others and put them first" kind of attitude. Paul told the church that, while there was nothing inherently sinful about eating certain meats that had been sacrificed to idols, they were to keep themselves from doing it in order to care for the others around them who would be tempted to violate their conscience.
- And that passage kind of brings up a bit of a question for us, how are we supposed to understand our rights as Christians? If we're not meant to listen to the message the world is telling us, what message are we listening to here?

1 Corinthians Context

- And as we start to get into 1 Corinthians 9 today, I want to take a moment to point out that this passage is a direct continuation of everything Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 8, and when looking at this passage, we gain a much better understanding of what Paul is talking about here if we take what he is saying in the context of everything he has said in 1 Corinthians so far.
- This is a big chapter, and we're going to be kind of flying through it to cover everything in the time that we have today, but I want to start with just looking at the first verse, 1 Corinthians 9:1

“Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?” - 1 Cor. 9:1 (ESV)

- He begins the passage identifying himself with the followers of Christ that he was referring to in the last chapter. With that first question “*am I not free?*” he’s placing them all on the same playing field. Having all trusted in Christ, they all enjoy the same level of freedom in Christ through the Gospel.
- This connection will be important going forward as Paul puts himself forward throughout this chapter as an example for the church to follow in how to relate to the rights they have been given in Christ, and the freedom they have in the Gospel.
- And I want you to think about that question that Paul starts with, does that sound a bit familiar? “*am I not free?*” It should.
- Continue with me and look at 1 Corinthians 9:3-4:

“This is my defence to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to eat and drink?” - 1 Cor. 9:3-4 (ESV)

- Again, this argument should sound vaguely familiar to you.
- I want you to remember back a number of weeks now, when we looked at 1 Corinthians 6 while talking about Paul addressing sexual immorality in the church.
- This is what Paul said in V. 12 of 1 Corinthians 6:

“‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be dominated by anything.” - 1 Cor. 6:12 (ESV)

- Remember, the idea that the Corinthians were free in Christ was one that they were using as their main argument to actually justify their own sexual sin.
- And as we looked at that passage we saw how Paul showed the church that they were wildly mis-applying that argument which, properly understood, did actually have a place in their lives.
- And I told you as we looked at that passage, that later on in the very same book Paul would use that same argument of “*freedom in Christ*”, but in a way that would show the church what it really meant and how it should really be understood and applied in their lives.
- And here, in 1 Corinthians 8, and now chapter 9 we’re seeing exactly that. Paul talking about this idea that we are “*free in Christ*” and what it really means for our lives.
- As we look at this passage, and the example Paul is giving from his own life, I want us to notice two things in this passage about how we, as followers of Christ should understand our own rights and freedoms, and the value we should place on them.

Paul teaches us to be concerned about our rights only inasmuch as they reflect the grace of God to us

- And I think one of the first things that we see here is that, in Paul's view, his rights are not entirely unimportant.
- The first section of the passage has him listing off a few of his "rights". What he has a right to be able to do.

"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? 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 Cor. 9:4-7 (ESV)

- So the arguments Paul is making in this passage are not a result of him being unaware of his rights, or completely unconcerned about them. That will be important.
- Paul actually knows his rights quite well, and one of the rights that he uses as his primary example in this passage is his right to be paid, or at least compensated for his ministry as an apostle.
- You see that in the examples that Paul uses of the farmer, the soldier and the shepherd. They all work, and expecting in return to be given some type of provision for their work.
- He applies this same principle to himself later in V. 13-14:

"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 same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel." - 1 Cor. 9:13-14 (ESV)

- So just like a soldier, or a farmer or a shepherd, those who spend their life to proclaim the Gospel, including Paul, have a right to receive some kind of provision for their work.
- Paul is aware of his rights, but he's not bringing that up here just for the sake of making sure people know what he's entitled to, or to ensure that he receives any kind of payment. He even says in V. 15

"But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision." - 1 Cor. 9:15 (ESV)

- Paul has this right to some kind of payment or provision from the ministry that he does, but he hasn't made use of that right at all, and he's specific in saying that he's not writing this in

order to get anything out of the church, or so that they would feel obligated to pay him. So that begs the question, why is he writing it?

- Well I think the important thing to notice here about how Paul views his rights can be seen as he refers back to the law of Moses in V. 8-10

“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 Cor. 9:8-10 (ESV)

- You can see there that his point in bringing up this connection to the law is to show why God had put certain laws in place, for the sake of his people. Paul writes, *“It was written for our sake”*.
- You see Paul isn't unaware of his own rights, but he cares about his own rights only inasmuch as they show a picture of the grace and love that God has given to him.
- He views his rights as a gift from God, which reflect God's love and provision for him.
- You even see that again in V. 14 where he says that it is the Lord who commands that those who proclaim the Gospel should get their living by it. This right that he has, which was decreed by the Lord, is a picture of Christ's grace and provision in his life.
- Paul doesn't bring up his own rights in order to get what he wants, or manipulate the church into giving him anything, he brings them up as a way to point people back to the glory of the God who gave him those rights. *“I have these rights, because God gave them to me.”*
- And that's the first example that Paul is giving to us here. I want you to ask yourself, do our hearts reflect Paul's in this?
- When we think about our rights, is it for the sake of seeking after everything we believe we are entitled to, or do we reflect on those rights as a picture of the grace we have been given in the Gospel?
- How would our lives and relationships change if we saw our rights, not as a justification for getting what we want, but as a way to share with those around us about the goodness of God and the grace that we've been given through the Gospel? That we have freedom in Christ, and that freedom reflects his glory.

Paul teaches us to be willing to lay down our rights for the sake of the Gospel

- And when we see our rights this way, as primarily being a gift of grace that we are given by God, that leads so naturally into the next part of the example that Paul gives us in this passage.

- As Paul talks about his rights, these gracious gifts that God has given that he has the “right” to this or that, he points out on a few occasions, in V. 12, 15, and 18 that he has made no use of those rights.
- Specifically in V. 12 he says:

“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 Cor. 9:12 (ESV)

- Now Paul is not saying that being paid for full time ministry is wrong, but in the Corinthian society, for Paul to accept financial provision from the people would have meant that they were in a way in authority over him, and had a right to dictate what he would teach, and how he would teach it, which could have caused some significant issues for Paul in his ministry.
- Because of this Paul refused to accept financial help during his time in Corinth, and rather worked as a tent maker to support himself while he was planting and caring for the church, and the reason that he chose to do this was to ensure that there would be no possible obstacles that would keep him from effectively sharing the Gospel with the people around him.
- He later says in V. 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.” - 1 Cor. 9:18 (ESV)

- So he didn’t lay down this right begrudgingly, he actually saw it as a reward, and a privilege to lay down his rights for the sake of the Gospel.
- And this was not the only situation where Paul does this. Later in V. 20-22 he says that he became a “Greek to the Greeks”, a “Jew to the Jews”, etc.
- In every situation, Paul was willing to give up certain rights in order to care for those around him, which meant giving up some preferences and comforts for the sake of being an effective witness to the people that he was with.
- And the reason that Paul would do this all comes back to two verses which really sum up the heart of this passage and the example that Paul gives us here. The first one is V. 19

“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.” - 1 Cor. 9:19 (ESV)

- The second is V. 23

“I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” - 1 Cor. 9:23 (ESV)

- This is the heart of Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians 9. It’s all for the sake of the Gospel “*that I might save some*”.
- Paul’s mindset was never one of “how do I make sure I’m taken care of”. His mindset was always “what will be most effective in sharing the Gospel and seeing others come to Christ?”
- If any of his rights got in the way of that, he was willing to lay them aside for the sake of the Gospel, no matter what the situation.
- Mark Taylor writes:
 - “*The key question for all Christian decision making is what brings glory to God and esteems the gospel in a manner that seeks to win as many as possible to Christ.*”
- Paul’s rights were not the most important thing to him, the Gospel was, and everything else came second.
- And again I think we have to ask ourselves, do we have this same kind of attitude? Are we willing to lay down our rights for the sake of the Gospel? To keep ourselves from putting stumbling blocks in front of those around us?
- This takes a lot of humility. It’s not an easy thing to do, yet this is the attitude that Paul calls us to in this passage.
- The passage then ends with a bit of an encouragement/challenge to the church in V. 24-27. He says:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” - 1 Cor. 9:24-27 (ESV)

- What he’s doing here is kind of wrapping up what he’s said up to this point, calling the church to keep their focus entirely on the Gospel, and not to get distracted by other things that could damage their witness and put barriers in the way of them sharing the Gospel.
- Just like an athlete in a big race keeps their eye on the prize, Paul calls the church to something similar here. To live their life with their eyes fixed on Christ and the Gospel, and to live all of their life in light of that focus.
- This final challenge is then going to lead directly into what we’ll look at next week as Paul gets into warning the church against idolatry, kind of providing a bridge between what we’ve just looked at, and what we’re going to look at next week.
- But in this final encouragement/challenge, Paul is essentially answering an important question that comes to mind as we read this passage.

Conclusion

- The question of how do we do this? In a culture that is so focused on the “look out for #1” mentality, how do we follow this example that Paul gives of how we as followers of Christ should think about our rights?
- We do it by reminding ourselves daily of the truth of the Gospel in our lives, and keeping our eyes fixed on Christ above everything else.
- If we’re surrendering our rights for the sake of the Gospel, we have to be reminded and convinced about how great the Gospel truly is. That it is worth giving up everything else for.
- If we don’t believe in our hearts that the Gospel is all that great, then we will struggle a lot in sacrificing our rights for the sake of the Gospel.
- But when we consider the Gospel, we realize that Jesus Christ is actually the best example of this principle lived out perfectly. He laid down everything. Absolutely everything.
- We talk about what we think we “deserve”, Jesus really does deserve everything. He created everything, and it all belongs to him. Yet he laid it all aside in order to die a death he had no “right” to die. He did not deserve to die on the cross in our place, but it was a sacrifice he willingly made for us.
- And it’s that example that Paul followed in his attitude towards his rights, and it’s the example that we should all be following.
- Later in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul will tell the church:

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” - 1 Cor. 11:1 (ESV)

- If we are called to follow Paul’s example in this passage, it is only because he is living his life with the purpose of imitating Christ.
- If Jesus was willing to sacrifice everything, lay down every right in order to give us the hope of eternity with him, what possible reason or excuse can we have for not wanting to give up our “rights” for the sake of loving those around us and seeing them trust in him?
- I think this passage serves as a great “heart check” for all of us. If we’re not willing to sacrifice our rights for the sake of the Gospel, we may need to ask ourselves what actually has the most importance in our life? It may be that our rights, while some being great gifts from God, have actually become idols in our hearts.
- That is why we need a passage like this. To be taught by Paul, to be reminded of Christ, that the Gospel should be the most important thing in our life, and what is at the centre of who we are, greater than any right.

- Once again, we see how viewing life through the “lens of the Gospel” changes everything. It dramatically changes the way that we understand our own rights and freedoms.
- We asked at the beginning of the sermon how Christians are supposed to understand our own rights and freedoms in a world that encourages a “me first” attitude.
- This passage gives us a perfect answer to that question.
- **We understand our rights as gifts from God which display his grace in our life, and we live with a willing heart to lay down our rights for the sake of the Gospel, showing the same love to others that Christ has shown to us.**