

Freedom and Rights pt. 1

1 Corinthians 9:1-14

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



The Corinthian church was marked by arrogance and pride. They had established a pattern of demanding their rights and individual preferences that led to infighting, partisanship, and taking advantage of the poor (lawsuits). Paul has reminded them that they are in Christ and these things are to have no place in their lives or in the church. This truth is the foundation for his answers on marriage and eating meat from the Pagan temples, where he grants freedom and liberty, but also establishes the prescriptive principle to serve one another. He continues fleshing out this principle in chapter nine.

In chapter nine, Paul is going to confront some criticism that he has faced from a faction of people in the Corinthian church. This criticism has to do with both the way Paul pays his bills (tent-making) and whether he has the “authority” to be giving the Corinthians any pastoral instruction. Remember, the divisions from earlier in chapter one when they picked and aligned themselves with their favorite pastor? Well, those who didn’t pick Paul as their favorite had engaged in gossip and slanderous conversation to undermine Paul’s influence and character. Paul addresses this criticism directly, but also takes the opportunity to continue teaching about the importance of serving one another and the posture of humility. Commentator Andrew Wilson offers a helpful explanation of this section, “Paul is presenting his model of ministry—offering the gospel free of charge, despite the theological and practical reasons why he could accept payment if he wanted to—as a real-life illustration of what he was saying in 8:9–13: namely, that believers should renounce their rights if it will help other believers. Serving our brothers and sisters matters more than our “rights” to do this or that. Love trumps freedom. Chapter 9, in that sense, is an extended explanation of why the Corinthians should not eat idol food, based on Paul’s apostolic ministry.”¹ Love is at the core of Paul’s words in this chapter.

For Paul (and us) the model of this “rights sacrificing” love is Christ. It is what he has done for us, and calls us to extend what we’ve received. Paul’s words are just a defense of himself, but an important reminder that **we have been served to become servants.**

¹ Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2021), 94.

1. To believers and about believers.

- a. We must understand and apply the primary point before we expand the principles outward. Otherwise, we are liable to apply the text in wrong and unfaithful ways.
 - i. This is a letter to believers and about their church life.
 - 1. Specifically, the problems that they are facing in their church life.
 - 2. This lens has to be primary for us.
- b. **Paul isn't making a commentary on civic life or political structures.**
 - i. Too often this passage is used in direct application to justify political views on both the left and the right. There is a worthwhile discussion on how we apply these principles to our civic lives as believers, but that is not the primary point of the passage.
 - ii. Ok, so how are believers supposed to understand their engagement in a secular and pluralistic society? Specifically, when our natural logic can make it seem like we need to "legislate" or advocate for more "Christian" policies. The truth is that we are to see our engagement through a missiological lens.
 - 1. That as we advocate for the rights and liberties of all people in a secular and pluralistic age, the values and virtues of the church shines bright. Specifically the claims of Jesus and the validity of his offer of salvation.
 - 2. **Another way of thinking about this, "No one can argue with a life well-lived."**
 - iii. **"A Christian social ethic of religious liberties sees religious pluralism and contestability as normative realities in a penultimate age that gives shape to how the church understands itself in this era. Normative pluralism shapes the posture of Christian witness in a secular age. Witnessing to the diversity of our age, religious liberty serves not only the church's interests but also society's. In society's embrace of religious liberty, it opens itself up to the claims made upon it by religion in general and the gospel in particular."²**
 - 1. Did you catch the closing sentence in that quote? As we defend the rights for religious liberty for all people, we actually create an open environment for the examination of Christianity – it's ethics, claims, and hopes.
 - 2. Ironically, when we as Christians demand the protection of our rights over other's rights, we actually create a very hostile and closed social response to the gospel.
 - a. This is especially problematic when we attach Christianity to any particular political candidate, party, or philosophy.
 - b. Christianity is rooted in Christ. Christ's kingdom is not of this world. Therefore, as Christians, we should be in constant tension with all political candidates, parties, and philosophies.
 - c. This tension means that we are able to affirm and question the policies of all political parties and candidates. For example – Christians should be able to affirm the right to God given autonomy while questioning the probability and policies that make corporate monopolies possible in a free-market society.
 - iv. All of this thought on the civic life from this passage is secondary to the primary thrust and application of the passage. → This passage continues to address the issues and problems that were plaguing the Corinthian believers in the church.

² Walker, Andrew T. *Liberty for All: Defending Everyone's Religious Freedom in a Pluralistic Age*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021.

1. Their problem: Pride & Divisions

- a. Remember they were arrogant, puffed up with knowledge, divided over their favorite pastors, and taking advantage of the poor in their congregation.

2. Humility is the cure for the problem of pride.

- a. Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less often. Their pride caused them to value self over others in increasingly tragic ways. So even this topic of “Paul’s rights” is aimed at developing humility in them.

3. Honoring one another is a tangible marker of the Christian faith.

- a. What is this value and characteristic of humility supposed to result in? Their honoring of one another. We have to remember that all of this is wrapped up for Paul in the example and person of Jesus. The only reason we are able to honor one another in a genuine, authentic, and humble way is because of what we’ve experienced in Christ.
- b. Again, the way they live and relate to one another in the church is to be a proclamation of the gospel to a watching world.
 - i. Why can you be different and still have love, joy, and unity? → Because of Christ.
 - ii. Why do you go out of your way to give to people who aren’t in your family? → Because of Christ.
 - iii. Why do you willingly and joyfully lay down your rights so that others flourish? → Because of Christ.
- c. The key to Paul’s instructions and Jesus’ example is that we are not forced to lay down our rights, but we choose to do so freely and with gospel purpose.

2. The gospel is primary.

a. What is the goal of your life?

- i. I asked this question last week, and it is worth asking again... and again. **Is the goal of your life the proclamation of Jesus or the establishment of your own happiness and success?**
 - 1. Now, we don’t need to renounce material things, but we are to hold them in tension. Yes, it is good and wise to work hard and take care of your loved ones and neighbors.
 - 2. The question here is demeaning those things, it is asking the questions of motivation and identity. What drives me? And what is my actual identity?
- ii. **V. 19 – We’ll come back to this in coming weeks, but it is a clear statement from Paul that helps us consider both our motivations and identity.**
 - 1. On the other hand, “freedom” is not his goal; the salvation of others is. Thus, since he is financially independent of all people, he is able freely to put himself at the disposal of all for the sake of the gospel. His language for this servanthood, “I made myself a slave to everyone,” not only keeps the present metaphor intact but also is what he and his churches have learned to use about the ministry of Jesus, who became “slave” of all in order to save (cf. Phil. 2:5–8; Gal. 4:4–5). This is why Paul regularly uses the word “servant” (or “slave”) to speak of his own

ministry (cf. 2 Cor. 4:5), and also why this becomes the basic expression of believers' relationships to one another (e.g., Gal. 5:13): **Jesus himself is the paradigm for such servanthood. Free, in order to become slave to all—this is surely the ultimate expression of truly Christian, because it is truly Christlike, behavior.**³

iii. **The gospel and its work is primary for Paul. This his motivation and his identity.**

1. Remember - Paul has suffered for Christ. → He isn't writing these things as nice ideas from an ivory tower. He is living them out.

a. **Loss of family.**

- i. His conversion to Christ surely impacted his family connections in a deeply shame/honor context.

b. **Arrested, beaten, and imprisoned.**

- i. Just read the second half of Acts to learn about all of the mistreatment he joyfully endured for Christ.

c. **Criticized by the Corinthians.**

- i. In fact, at the heart of Chapter nine is the reality that he has been severely criticized by some in the church.

b. **Paul in context – Jesus above everything else.**

- i. Remember – Paul has lost and willingly given up a great deal to follow Jesus.
 1. Does Jesus fit neatly into the ordered box of your life? Or, does Jesus push on and righteously disturb each area of your life?
- ii. V. 12 – Paul's integrity in financial matters was of paramount importance in his ministry (Acts 20:33–35; 2 Cor. 12:14–18; 1 Thess. 2:9). He was probably at a stage in his relationship with the Corinthians when he did not want them to understand the relationship in terms of patron–client. **Patron–client relationships were ubiquitous in the Graeco-Roman world, and if the Corinthians thought that Paul was their client, expectations would be placed upon him that could limit his ministry. If the Corinthians were Paul's patrons, he would need to fulfill his role as their client.**⁴
- iii. With a series of “not/but” contrasts, Paul begins to explain why he “did not use”⁷⁷ this right (*exousia*)” as “others” had. The fuller explanation will be given in vv. 15–18; but before he gets to that, he will offer yet two more illustrations of the fact of his rights (vv. 13–14). The explanation here is that rather than “use this right, on the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.” In saying this Paul indicates both that this was a conscious choice on his part and that it was something that brought a certain amount of hardship. As noted earlier, this began as early as the mission to Thessalonica, where he refers to laboring with his own hands as something he did “night and day” so as not to burden anyone (1 Thess. 2:9–10; 2 Thess. 3:8).⁵
 1. **The reason for this choice is expressed in terms of not causing any hindrance to “the gospel of Christ,” which for Paul would mean not to obstruct evangelizing in any way. Paul is a man of a single passion, “the gospel of Christ.”** As he will explain in vv. 19–23, everything he is and does is “for the sake of the gospel.” When it becomes a choice, therefore, between his “rights” and others' hearing

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 426.

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 187.

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 410–411.

of the gospel, there is no choice at all; anything that would get in the way of someone's hearing the gospel for what it is, the good news of God's pardoning grace, can be easily laid aside.⁶

- c. With Paul's words and example in mind, we need to ask the question again, "What is the goal of your life?"
 - i. When you go to work / school / home – Is your goal to be a gospel influence and magnify Jesus?
 - ii. When you think about your civic life – Is your goal to honor your neighbors in a way that demonstrates the goodness of Jesus?
 - iii. Here is another way of asking it, "How would you define a life well lived?"

3. All things to all people.

- a. For Paul, the life well lived is a gospel centered life. Not one of material excess, fame, or even rights. It is as he will say, "I've become all things to all people... so that I may share the blessings of the gospel." (v.23)
 - i. When we really think about it, this is a lovely idea for a card or a plaque, but it is deeply uncomfortable and difficult work to live out. We'll press more into this in the coming weeks.
- b. This "all things" work requires understanding.
 - i. Important – Understanding doesn't equal agreement.
 - ii. Understanding requires love - More in the coming weeks on this. But let's dive into love.
- c. **Love.** A central virtue in most ethical traditions, one that denotes an attitude toward another involving both an affection for and a deep commitment to the other. In the Christian tradition, love (especially agape) is an expression of the essential nature of God, the central characterization of the relationship between God and humans, and the chief virtue that is to characterize Christians in their relationships to God and one another, as shaped by the indwelling Holy Spirit. **The connection between love and God's own character gives rise to the Christian focus on love as the fundamental characteristic of Christian discipleship and hence of Christian ethics.**⁷
 - i. In fact, many philosophers and sociologists think of love as the primary or highest virtue of an ethically centered life.
 - 1. Consider the way we talk about care for the planet, the displaced, our political institutions, and even justice itself. All of these are paired with love as the central value. I.e., If you love this, then you will...
- d. **Love is a tricky word in our context.**
 - i. **Culturally** – Love is often equated to not limiting someone's expression or being permissive in order to limit pain and enable self-expression or self-discovery.
 - 1. **Martha Nussbaum** (Philosopher and author): "To be able to be loved is important, but to love is even more so... True love is a union of the emotional and the cognitive, **a recognition and appreciation of the other's individuality and uniqueness.**"⁸

⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 411.

⁷ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 72.

⁸ Martha Nussbaum – from *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*

- a. Here, Nussbaum very much reflects the thinking of the Western secular age and the focus on the individual.
 - b. The challenge in this position is that the ultimate conclusion presses toward the reality that as long as an individual's uniqueness is being appreciated, then that is all that matters. The question of ethics and morality is left subjective at best.
 - 2. Those things are not inherently bad. However, it really isn't a complete definition of love. And, as noted above, leaves ethics and morality purely subjective.
- ii. **Biblically** – Love is exclusively tied up with the character and nature of God.⁹
 - 1. **Benevolence, Grace, Mercy, Persistence**
 - a. When we think in terms of God's moral attributes, perhaps what comes first to mind is the cluster of attributes we are here classifying as love. Many regard it as the basic attribute, the very nature or definition of God. The basic dimensions of God's love to us are (1) benevolence, (2) grace, (3) mercy, and (4) persistence.
 - 2. **Love and goodness go hand in hand.**
 - a. Looking at Jn. 3:16 – Out of love God sent his son so that humanity might again experience the goodness of a right relationship with God.
 - 3. **Love and serving go hand in hand.**
 - a. Again, let's go back to Mk. 10:45 – The Son of Man (God) did not come to be served, but came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.
- iii. What does love require, and what does it result in?
 - 1. Requires –¹⁰
 - a. **Benevolence** – By benevolence, we mean God's concern for the welfare of those whom he loves. He unselfishly seeks our ultimate welfare.
 - b. **Grace** - By this we mean that God deals with his people not on the basis of their merit or worthiness, what they deserve, but simply according to their need; in other words, he deals with them on the basis of his goodness and generosity.
 - c. **Mercy** - God's mercy is his tenderhearted, loving compassion for his people. It is his tenderness of heart toward the needy.
 - d. **Persistence** - We read of God's persistence in Psalm 86:15; Romans 2:4; 9:22; 1 Peter 3:20; and 2 Peter 3:15. In all of these verses God is pictured as withholding judgment and continuing to offer salvation and grace over long periods of time.
 - 2. Results in –
 - a. **Goodness** – The experience of what is truly good.
 - b. **Justice** – The restoration of a wrong, specifically, to be made whole.
 - c. **Growth** – Formation into something new.
 - i. **"Love in the biblical sense, then, is not merely indulging someone near at hand. Rather, it inherently involves justice as well. This means there will be a concern for the ultimate welfare of all humanity, a passion to do what is right, and enforcement of appropriate consequences for wrong action."**¹¹

⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 266.

¹⁰ See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed.

¹¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 267–268.

- ii. “Christians are commanded to love their neighbors. In fulfilling that obligation one will undoubtedly consider whether specific act in a particular situation is just and benevolent to the neighbor - to do so seems necessary in view of what it means to love someone. But what makes the loving act morally good is not that it is benevolent or just, but that God commanded it. To summarize: what makes an act an act of love is at least in part that it exemplifies benevolence and justice. What makes such a loving act moral is that it obeys God's command to love.”¹²
- iv. This idea of willingly and lovingly laying down our freedoms and rights for others is a tough pill to swallow. At best, it means that we have to deny ourselves, and at worst, it can leave us feeling like a doormat to be walked over. However, we must be reminded that for Paul, his model (and ours) is to be Christ. It was Christ who willingly and lovingly laid down his divine rights to become human, bear **our** sin, and give his life for us. Christ's love and action were done with us in mind, and that is what drives Paul's life and instruction. Here is how theologian Karl Barth expresses it: **“Christian love turns to the other purely for the sake of the other.** It does not desire it for itself. It loves it simply because it is there as this other, with all its value or lack of value. **It loves it freely.** But it is more than this turning. In Christian love the loving subject gives to the other, the object of love, that which it has, which is its own, which belongs to it. **It does so irrespective of the right or claim that it may have to it, or the further use that it might make of it.**”¹³

¹² Feinberg, John S., and Paul D. Feinberg. *Ethics for a Brave New World*. 2nd ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.

¹³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley, First American edition (London; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 173–174.