

## **Free to Serve**

### **1 Corinthians 9:1-27**

Christian freedom – what is it? In John 8:31-32, Jesus says:

*If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

What's this freedom Jesus promises?

- Does it mean I'm now free of human limitations? Can I now flap my arms and leap tall buildings in a single bound? Can I see through thick walls? Can I fearlessly stand in the path of a speeding bullet?
- Does it mean I'm free of human authorities? Can I now ignore those numbers in the red circles along our roadways? Can I forget about submitting tax returns? Can I ignore my mother's commands to eat my pumpkin?
- Does it mean I'm now free to do what I want? Can I take out my frustrations by punching others in the nose? Can I help myself to merchandise in BigW without paying for it?
- Does it mean I'm now free from God's boundaries? Can I now sleep with my girlfriend? Can I ignore meeting with other Christians? Can I simply treat my time and money as my own?

### **The Setting**

Last week we looked at 1 Corinthians 8. Some of the Corinthians boasted about their new Christian freedom. In particular, they boasted about their Christian freedom to somehow eat the food of sacrifices to idols. That was a highly relevant issue for them.

- They knew an idol had no real existence.

- They knew there was no God but one.
- They claimed we're free to eat these sacrifices to idols. We're free to eat this meat sacrificed in the idol's presence.

Basically, Paul agrees with their reasoning – as far as it goes. But Paul comes to the opposite conclusion. 8:13

*Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall..*

In chapter 9, Paul still deals with this same issue.

- You can see it by his use of the word *free*.
  - 9:1 – *am I not free?*
  - 9:19 – *though I am free and belong to no man.*
- You can see it because he's still speaking about meat sacrificed to idols in 10:14-33.

But in chapter 9, the specific issue of sacrifices to idols isn't mentioned. Rather, Paul uses himself as a model. He uses part of his life to illustrate the principle he stated in 8:13 – namely, the fact I may have Christian freedom to do something doesn't mean I'll demand my rights to actually do it. Some things are much more important than me demanding my rights as a Christian.

I suspect Paul also deals here with another matter that troubled the Corinthians. They thought Paul was simply inconsistent. You could never work out where he stood.

- Sometimes he behaved like a good Jew and only ate kosher food; at other times he happily partied in the home of Gentiles.
- On one occasion, he strongly encouraged Timothy to be circumcised; on another occasion he refused to allow Titus to be circumcised.
- Sometimes he looked like he still lived under the

Jewish law; at other times he looked as if he'd completely abandoned the law.

- Perhaps he sometimes ate meat sacrificed to idols and at other times refused to eat such meat.

Some in Corinth used that seeming inconsistency in his behaviour to undermine Paul's authority in the church. They claimed Paul was so schizophrenic in his behaviour that it wasn't possible to work out exactly what he wanted you to do. And, if you can't understand him, why should you obey him. Paul defends himself against that.

### Paul's Rights

In verse 1, Paul asks: *Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?* He then refers to his power – his authority, his rights – as an apostle. He does so by a series of three questions in verses 4 to 6:

- Don't we have the right to eat and drink?
- Don't we have the right to take along a believing wife?
- Don't we have the right to refrain from working for a living like other apostles?

From the way Paul asks these questions, it seems these were recognised rights for apostles in the early church. The church gave apostles sufficient material support so they didn't have to spend time earning money from other sources. The church looked after their physical needs so they were free to pursue the concerns of ministry. They could do their jobs as apostles without being distracted by concerns about where their next meal would come from. Their apostolic ministry was their job. They were provided for by the Christian churches.

Paul says: This is right and proper. This is how it should

be. It's the normal pattern of behaviour for apostles. He gives five reasons to show this is right.

The **first** reason comes from the natural order. Verse 7. When a soldier enlists in the army, he expects the army to look after him. He expects the army to provide the necessary equipment for him to be a soldier. He expects the army to provide his rations. If he gets an overseas assignment, he expects the army to pay his shipping and accommodation costs. It's the same in other areas:

- The one hired to work in the vineyard expects to be paid for his work.
- The one hired to look after the flock expects to be paid for his work.

This is the way things are in everyday life. People don't expect to work for nothing.

The **second** reason comes from God's law. Verses 8 to 10. Deuteronomy 25:4 states:

*Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.*

In other words, when the ox works in the field, it should be allowed to graze en route. You aren't to keep it hungry, but you allow its physical needs to be met. Paul says it's not just talking about oxen. There's a principle behind this statement: The worker is worthy of his hire. People should benefit from the work they do.

The **third** reason comes from the area of commerce and contract – it's the law of indebtedness. Verse 11:

*If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?*

The apostles – and others ministering the gospel – provide spiritual things for others. People receive spiritual benefit from having the gospel ministered to them. If

they didn't receive spiritual benefit, they'd have left the church. It's only fitting they should pay for the benefit they received. In this case, the payment's to be made in lesser, material things. Spiritual things are much more important than physical things. What they give back isn't more than what they received.

The **fourth** reason reflects temple practice. Verse 13. When people took their sacrifices to the temple – whether the Jewish temple or pagan temples – the meat of the animal was usually divided three ways:

- Some went to the god – it's burnt on the altar.
- Some went to the priests – those who served in the temple.
- Some went to the person making the sacrifice so they could have a feast.

Thus, priests got their cut from offerings brought to the temples. Usually, they got the best bits. That's how they got paid.

Paul says those serving God in apostolic ministry are entitled to their cuts of the sacrifices brought by the church. Now, although Christians present their bodies as living sacrifices, Paul doesn't advocate cannibalism. Rather, he says the apostles have the right to support from churches. They're to receive physical benefit from their ministry.

The **fifth** reason is the command of Jesus. Verse 14. It's not clear exactly which words of Jesus Paul means. One possibility would be Matthew 10:10 and Luke 10:7 where Jesus says the labourer deserves his wages or his food. It may be Paul refers to something Jesus said that isn't specifically recorded in our Bibles.

All that's to say that apostles have the right to support by the church. Paul's an apostle. So Paul has the right to have the Corinthians support him financially in his ministry to them. It's quite a lengthy treatment and an impressive list of reasons he provides. Those involved in gospel ministry have the right to support from those who benefit from that ministry.

### Paul's Routine

Having spent so much time establishing his rights in this matter, Paul then turns round and says he doesn't make use of those rights. This isn't his behaviour. Verse 12:

*But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.*

And again in verse 15:

*But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast.*

No wonder the Corinthians thought him inconsistent.

Now that he's a Christian apostle, he has the freedom to be paid for his apostolic ministry. That's his right as an apostle. Yet, he doesn't demand his rights. Rather, he exercises his Christian freedom in such a way that he freely presents the gospel to others. Verse 18:

*That in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.*

Further, in verse 19, Paul tells us how he uses his Christian freedom.

*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself*

*a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.*

What's Paul do with his freedom? He uses it to make himself a slave to others. He explains further what he means in verses 20 to 22:

- To a Jew I become as a Jew.
- To those under the law (which probably means the Jews) I become as one under the law.
- To those outside the law (which probably means the Gentiles) I become as one outside the law.
- To the weak (to those we talked about last week – the ones with weak consciences) I become weak.

He becomes like one of them, whoever they may be. He shows great flexibility in behaviour – which again makes him look inconsistent. For when he's with those under the law, he refuses to eat pig – but when he's with those outside the law, he's quite happy to enjoy their sweet and sour pork. He displays opposite behaviour, depending on his circumstances.

There are limits to his behaviour, however. You can't push this thing too far. He doesn't become a thief in order to win thieves. He doesn't become a temple prostitute in order to win temple prostitutes. He doesn't become lawless. He doesn't become rebellious to God. He doesn't move into sinfulness.

### **Paul's Reasons**

I'll come back to this in a minute. But before doing so, it's crucial to note Paul's rationale. Why does Paul act this way? Again and again, he tells us in this passage. It's for the sake of the gospel.

- He refuses to be paid for his apostolic ministry so there'll be no obstacle in the way of the gospel (verse 12); so he can present the gospel free of

charge (verse 18).

- He becomes all things to all people so he may win them to the gospel (verses 19 to 22).

He sums it all up in verse 23:

*I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

That's his underlying motivation that provides the underlying consistency for all his behaviour. He does it all to help other people become Christians.

That motivation's important. When he's like those under the law, he doesn't do it for the same reason they do it. They live according to the law because they think it gets them into heaven. They refuse to eat sweet and sour pork because they think it earns them merit points with God. That's not Paul's motivation. When with them, he refuses to eat pork simply because it gives him opportunity to tell these people the gospel. If they make an issue of it – if they say to Paul: if you eat pork you'll be eternally condemned – then Paul's likely to get some pork and eat it in front of them. He doesn't put himself back under the law in the sense that he thinks this provides the way to heaven or earns him merit with God. To minister to these people, he does things the law requires, but he doesn't do it in obedience to the law.

Similarly, when he becomes like those not under the law, he has a different motivation to them. They may conform to social pressure. They may want to demonstrate their pagan freedom from God's standards. That isn't Paul's motivation. He behaves this way because it gives him opportunity to tell these people the gospel. That's why in these circumstances his behaviour won't move in the direction of lawlessness and rebellion – for that would deny

the message of the gospel.

It isn't a matter of living the way Paul wants to live. He doesn't say: I refrain from eating pork because I can't stand the stuff. Nor does he say: I get stuck into the pork because it's my favourite food and I just can't resist it. That isn't the issue at all. Certainly, Paul says he is free: he's free to eat or free not to eat. Yet Paul uses his freedom not to indulge his own personal preferences, but to become a slave to all. Whether or not he eats is dependent on the preferences of those present with him at the time. He lives in service to others.

Is that easy? Not necessarily – but it's important for the sake of the goal. That's why he introduces the pictures of the runner and the boxer in verses 24 to 27. These people have a goal in front of them – to win the competition. It's like all those athletes heading to New Delhi. They want to win the gold medal. Have they been lazing round the last few years? Do they simply turn up in New Delhi and say: I'd like the gold medal please? Of course not. For many years they disciplined themselves. They put aside some of their own interests for the sake of a gold medal.

Paul says our goal's much more important. That's merely a perishable goal. The gold medals our athletes win are perishable. They can be stolen or lost. They don't take them with them when they die. The goal we have is much more important – it's imperishable. It's the goal of having people share the blessings of the gospel. It's the goal of having people in right relationship with God and all that means for eternity. So Paul disciplines himself in the way he serves others – for the sake of that goal. And he encourages us to copy his example.

### Some Modern Examples

Think of some modern examples. What should ministers wear when they preach the gospel? That's an area where the Bible allows freedom. Should I simply wear whatever feels comfortable to me at the time? Yes, I have the right to do that, but it may not be wise for me to insist on my rights. Rather I serve the audience. This was important to work out when we were on mission deputation.

- If I preached to an older congregation in a conservative church, I didn't turn up in jeans and T-shirt. That would distract them. They'd be too busy thinking how unsuitable I was to hear what I said.
- If I preached to a group of teenagers, I didn't turn up in an old-fashioned suit. That would distract them. Before I even opened my mouth, they'd have concluded I had nothing relevant to say to them.

Let's move to a second example – clothing fashions. As a Christian, am I free to wear the latest clothing fashions of Australian culture? In terms of that bald question: yes. Basically, in themselves, clothes are irrelevant to the gospel. I'm free to wear what I want. Yet, other issues are also involved. One issue is the matter of Christian stewardship. Is it a wise use of God's money to buy expensive fashions or fashions that quickly disappear? Another issue is the matter of motivation. You may be free to buy the latest fashions, but why do you want to buy them?

- Is it simply to be considered fashion conscious and up-to-date and "with it"? Isn't that slavery?
- Is it simply to look good to others? Isn't that also slavery – both to those you want to impress and to our society's definition of what "looks good"?

Those motivations aren't what Paul talks about here.

They aren't godly motivations.

But it could be your motivation is purely for the sake of the gospel. You know that if you don't wear the right label, you won't be accepted by that particular group, and you won't have the opportunity to share the gospel with them. So you buy that label – so you have the chance to minister the gospel to them. It's not simply a matter of acceptance into the "in" group – it's a matter of acceptance for the purpose of preaching the gospel to them. There's a significant difference.

But the principle of 8:13 also must be considered. What if, as a woman, following fashions causes my Christian brother to fall? Suppose the latest fashion was a string bikini. If your Christian brother saw you in that, what would that do to him? Would it generate all sorts of lustful and ungodly thoughts in his grey matter? If your Christian sister saw you in that, would she be envious?

And so you ask: Which takes priority – the well-being of my fellow Christian or the salvation of the non-Christian? It's rare the two will actually conflict. Is it really necessary to resort to immodest fashions to minister the gospel? That seems highly suspect.

- It won't help you evangelise females, because they'll be too busy competing with you.
- It won't help you evangelise males, because they'll be too busy devouring your body to hear a word you say.

## Conclusion

Many more examples could be considered. It's an area in which the church has struggled in every generation. The

principles remain the same, but the specific issues keep changing – although even they tend to recur in cycles. For now, I must conclude.

This passage touches on a number of issues in passing. For example, it's one of the strongest affirmations in the Bible on the responsibility to support those involved in gospel ministry. Yet, tonight I've tried to focus on its main theme within the overall context of Corinthians.

Paul uses himself as an example – an example he encourages us to follow (11:1). Yes, as a Christian he's free and does have certain rights. However, he uses his freedom and his rights for the sake of the gospel. That's his priority – that people become Christians. He uses his freedom in service of others. He lays down his self in his labour to present the gospel free of charge to others. The nature of his freedom is to put himself into voluntary slavery.

Some Christians take parts of this passage to justify all sorts of behaviour they want to do – to assert the rights they're given by the gospel. At one level, that's consistent with what Paul writes. Yet, it fundamentally misses Paul's basic thrust – and thus misrepresents the passage overall. Paul doesn't use his freedom for himself; he uses it to serve others. True freedom isn't simply the ability to do as I please – that's closer to the definition of sin. True freedom involves serving the purpose for which we're made.