HOW TO PREACH THE GOSPEL

1 Corinthians 9:1–27

Key Verse: 9:12b

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

What is most important in life to you? Some people would say family. Others would say friendship. Still others would say “myself.” People pursue success in a multitude of forms as what’s most important in life to them. In today’s passage we find an unusually personal testimony of Apostle Paul. In the midst of mentioning many things, Paul shares what was most important in life to him: the gospel of Christ. Why was the gospel so important to him? How did his life show it? What should we take from all this? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

In 1 Corinthians, chapter 9 is part of a section, chapters 8–10, in which Paul is teaching on the issue of eating food sacrificed to idols. But right in the middle of the section he goes into his apostleship, asking many intense, rhetorical questions. It seems unrelated, and we wonder why he’s doing this.

To understand, we need to know the context. Originally Paul went to Corinth toward the end of his second missionary journey. He lived in Corinth for a year and a half and had gotten the church started. When he left for more missionary journeys, a learned man named Apollos went to live in Corinth for a while; the Bible says Apollos became a great help to the new Christians there (Ac18:1–28). Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian church didn’t end, though. They kept in contact, writing each other letters even before Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (5:9; 7:1), and Paul also had heard a report about them (5:1). But Paul’s absence in Corinth had created a kind of leadership vacuum.

As we saw earlier, Paul had to mention Apollos several times (1:12; 3:4–6,22; 4:6). Why? Because some Corinthians were thinking Apollos was better than Paul. Apollos, the Bible tells us, had been raised in the famous city of Alexandria in Egypt (Ac18:24), where people at that time could get the best education in the Western world. The Bible describes Apollos as “a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures” who could speak “with great fervor” (Ac18:24,25). People in Corinth highly valued human knowledge and speaking ability. Compared to Apollos, Paul seemed “unimpressive” and his speaking seemed to “amount to nothing” (2Co10:10). Paul admitted he was untrained as a speaker (2Co11:6). In their spiritual immaturity the Corinthians were thinking from a worldly point of view (3:1,3; cf. 2Co1:12,17; 5:16).

Though we know this background, it’s still not so clear why Paul’s authority was such a problem for the Corinthians. But we also need to remember how frank Paul was. He reminded them of their lowly human background (1:26). He called them “worldly” and “mere infants in Christ” (3:1–3). He told them they were self-deceived into thinking they were wise (3:18). He called them “puffed up” in their boasting and material wealth, and arrogant (4:6–8,18). He rebuked them for tolerating gross immorality among them (5:1,2) and said their boasting was not good (5:6). He severely rebuked them for having lawsuits against each other (6:1–8). He reminded them that their past lives were so sinful, and that they’d been saved only by the grace of Jesus (6:9–11). He rebuked them for going to prostitutes (6:15,16) and told them to honor God with their bodies (6:20). He rebuked them for sinning against weak brothers or sisters by eating food sacrificed to idols (8:10–12). Later he’s going to rebuke them for their way of celebrating the Lord’s Supper (11:17–22,27,30). He even tells them, “Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?” (14:36). Surely it was hard for them to hear such stinging rebukes. So in chapter 9 Paul emphasizes his apostleship. We want to think more about this.

Read verse 1. The first thing we notice here is that Paul mentions his freedom; he says it again in verse 19. He’s talking about the freedom that comes from the grace of Christ (see also 7:22; Gal5:1,13). His grace gives all of us the freedom not to have to live by religious laws and rules. Paul himself was also free in Christ to do whatever he thought best. But he was even more than free. He also says here that he was an apostle. “Apostle” means one who was sent. Who sent him? Christ himself sent him. How could Paul claim that? It’s seen in his dramatic conversion. Paul in his former life had been known as Saul, and he’d actually been working to persecute the church of God (15:8). But while he was on the road to Damascus, the Risen Christ appeared to him, knocked him off his horse, and called him to be his servant (Ac9:1–19; 22:7,8; 26:14,15). Seeing Christ in person was a very special privilege and major qualification of getting to be called his apostle. But there’s a sense in which anyone who receives Christ personally also becomes his apostle. Paul wrote in Romans 1:5 that we all have received “grace and apostleship.” To preach the gospel, we need to know Christ personally and have the assurance that he’s the one sending us.

There was another qualification in being an apostle. What was it? Paul says in verses 1b,2: “Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.” Earlier Paul wrote that he became their father through the gospel (4:15). When he shared the good news of Jesus with them, God worked in them to help them repent and believe and receive the Holy Spirit, and this work of God in them confirms that Paul really was Christ’s apostle. It reminds us of Jesus’ words, “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Mt7:15–20). Apostleship isn’t about just speaking well, but about bearing spiritual fruit. In 2 Corinthians 12:12 Paul writes, “I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles.” This may mean many things, but it especially means that people had been changed by the power of the gospel through Paul’s own persistent ministry.

And why is he talking about this? Look at verse 3. Paul was defending himself to those who were sitting in judgment on him. Why? It’s not really about Paul the man. Doubting Paul’s legitimacy would lead to questioning the gospel he preached. Usually Paul didn’t defend himself; he lived before God and let God defend him (4:3–5). But he defended himself in order to really defend the gospel itself (Php1:7). Defending himself would actually strengthen *them* (2Co12:19).

So who were these people sitting in judgment on Paul? They thought they, too, were gifted by the Spirit and were prophets (14:37). They were confident that they belonged to Christ but needed to remember that Paul and his coworkers belonged to Christ just as much as they did (2Co10:7). Though Paul was the one who’d given these people the greatest gift, the gospel of Christ, they were now sitting in judgment on him. It was so sad to see them treating Paul like this.

And what was his defense? Look at verses 4,5. Mainly he’s talking about an apostle’s right to have his physical needs taken care of. It was a well-known practice in the early church. Jesus’ brothers who came to believe and went visiting churches were taken care of. Cephas, the other name for Peter, was also taken care of when he traveled. In fact, all the twelve apostles were treated this way. In contrast, Paul and Barnabas, the ones who actually got most of the Gentile churches started, lived differently (6). They didn’t take their wives with them or receive any material support. Instead, they worked with their own hands as tentmakers, to pay their own way (4:12a; cf. Ac18:1–5; 20:34).

Why did they do that? Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:7–9: “Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you, and will continue to do so.” People were likely criticizing Paul for not taking financial support, and questioning whether he was even qualified to receive it. But Paul wanted to make it clear to people that while he was sharing the gospel, he wasn’t expecting to get paid for it. In fact, in verse 18 he says he actually considered it his “reward” to share the gospel free of charge.

Read verses 7–12a. Paul uses so many examples here of how right it is for a gospel preacher to receive financial support. In verse 13 he mentions how those who serve in the temple receive food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what’s offered on it. Read verse 14. Our Lord Jesus taught his disciples when he sent them out two by two to rely on the financial support of those who heard the gospel from them (Mt10:10; Lk10:7). In his other letters Paul also taught churches to do this (Gal6:6; 1Ti5:17).

But why is Paul emphasizing this so strongly here? Read verse 15. It’s so unusual that after building such a strong case for giving financial support for a gospel preacher, Paul now says so strongly that he doesn’t want any. Why is he doing this? Notice how often he repeats the word “right”; it’s in verses 4,5,6,12,15 and 18. In preaching the gospel Paul gave up his rights. Why is he mentioning this? Look back at 8:9. In discussing eating food sacrificed to idols Paul had just told them: “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.” He made it personal in 8:13. And now he shows them that as an apostle of Christ, he did not make use of his right to being supported financially. It was to help them live in the same way.

We live in a world where people love to claim their rights: the right to free speech, the right to carry a gun, the right to worship in any way they want, or not to, their right to vote, their right to have an attorney and to sue in the courts. When driving a car people claim “the right of way,” cutting others off. People claim their right even to stay in an apartment without paying rent. It’s good to have many rights and to exercise them. But followers of Jesus are willing to give up their rights. Why? Read verse 12b. To Paul, there was something more important than his rights. What was it? It was the gospel of Christ. It was spreading the gospel of Christ. To Paul, living for the gospel was so much bigger than himself. Why? Because the gospel is God’s message to the world. It’s God’s same message today. The gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes (Ro1:16). Our Lord Jesus actually told his disciples, “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and the gospel will save it” (Mk8:35). Paul took the gospel message so seriously. He took the task of sharing the gospel so seriously. Why? Read verse 16. Paul had an awareness that God himself had commissioned him to preach the gospel. People were not telling him to do it; God was (cf. Gal1:11,12,15–17). Paul was under obligation to God Almighty our Judge. Sometimes Paul felt like sharing the gospel; he was willing. Other times, he was just discharging the trust committed to him (17). But Paul took the task of sharing the gospel as his main life’s mission. He considered his own life worth nothing if he didn’t complete the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace (Ac20:24).

So what does it mean to us to live for the gospel? It doesn’t just mean dying in a dramatic way like a martyr. In verse 12 Paul shares one meaning. He says he was willing to “put up with anything.” He put up with not receiving financial support. He put up with many inconveniences to support himself. He also put up with these people sitting in judgment on him. He put up with people questioning his authority. He put up with people taking and taking and not giving. He put up with all kinds of misbehavior. Why? Not because he had no courage to say anything. He did have the courage to speak. But Paul controlled himself in many ways because he was sensitive to the spread of the gospel of Christ. He knew that if he made an issue of other things, the gospel could not spread. If he ignored how what he was doing affected others, the gospel could not spread.

Paul goes on to expand this principle. Read verses 19–23. Paul gave up not only the right of support, but all his rights to live in his own way. It’s so hard to become like people who are different from us. But Paul made every effort to do so. Why? As he said in verse 12b, it was so as not to hinder the gospel of Christ. When we stay in our own world, in our own culture, in our own pride and selfishness, we can hinder the gospel. Paul became like whoever he was with so as to not hinder the gospel. Surely it involved adapting to people’s language, culture and way of life. In history, the most effective and fruitful missionaries have been the ones who followed this principle. The Jesuit missionaries became famous around the world for adapting to local cultures. Hudson Taylor denied himself and adapted himself to Chinese language and culture, even dressing and eating like the people. In our own ministry, Sarah Barry denied herself and adapted herself to Korean culture. Dr. Samuel Lee came as a missionary when he was 50 years old. But even at that age he did his best to master the English language and to embrace American young people, and God worked powerfully. Juan Seo denied himself and adapted himself to the culture in Venezuela, and the ministry raised many mature native gospel coworkers. Paul example is challenging us today, “Am I willing to do anything, by any means, to get close to people, to help as many as possible to accept the gospel and grow in Christ?”

In verses 24–27 Paul concludes by talking about the self-discipline necessary to preach the gospel. We especially need to deny our own sinful nature so that our own hypocrisy doesn’t hinder the gospel.

Read verse 12b again. May God inspire us to see the great value of the gospel of Christ, and the great privilege of spreading the gospel. May God help us fight against anything within us that hinders the gospel to spread through us.