

# Laboring Willingly

Psalm 104:19–30, 1 Corinthians 9:1–18

Last week I preached on “Tentmaking.” It is instructive that the apostle Paul was so committed to Christ that he would stay in town at his own expense so that he could keep preaching, rather than throw in the towel and make an emergency trip back to Syrian Antioch to raise missionary support. Here was a man who believed so strongly in what he was preaching that he didn’t give up when funds ran out but stayed at his post, continuing to preach Christ. In our reading today he describes his inner motivation: “*Necessity* is laid upon me; yes, *woe* is me if I do not preach the gospel!” Paul didn’t preach because it was easy work. He was not in it for the money; he would give his all to tell others about Christ and win his Lord’s approval.

Tomorrow is Labor Day. The fourth commandment states, “six days shalt thou labor.” Every person—not just adult breadwinners—ought to endeavor to serve God by working. It is not good for humans to live lives of ease; even little children should be taught to do household chores as they are able. Every Christian should remember that “we serve the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:24). While we should endeavor to do good work, it is not primarily to serve our immediate *superior*, but to serve *Christ*. The Christian serves Christ. It is from Christ that we will receive the reward of the inheritance.

Today we are taking a short break from our Acts study to expand a little on the idea of doing manual labor (“secular” work) to fund Gospel ministry. We left Acts as Paul was beginning his ministry in Corinth, so it is fitting that today we should look at what Paul would later write to this very church. Consider with me three points made in our New Testament text, first,

## 1. Paul enumerates his rights.

Our text begins, “Am I not an apostle? Am I not free?” This is the wording of the Byzantine manuscripts. The Alexandrian copies reverse the order: “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?” It is easy to see how a careless scribe might accidentally omit the phrase “Am I not an apostle?” then, realizing his mistake, add it in after having already written, “Am I not free?” I am convinced that the Byzantine wording is correct, but reversing the order doesn’t change the apostle’s argument. Here are four rhetorical questions that each expect a positive answer: “Am I not an apostle?” “*Yes.*” “Am I not free?” “*Yes.*” “Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?” “*Yes.*” “Are you not my work in the Lord?” “*Yes.*”

It would seem that Paul’s apostleship was being challenged in the church at Corinth. There were some who denied that Paul was actually an apostle, or at least insinuated that he was not one.<sup>1</sup> Even now, many centuries later, there are some

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<sup>1</sup> John Gill *Commentary* (e-Sword)

who deny that Paul was an apostle.<sup>2</sup> Yet this is one of the major teachings of the book of Acts. Saul of Tarsus was a hater of Christ and a persecutor of the Christian church. On his way to Damascus to arrest the Christians there, the Lord appeared to him in a brilliant light and said, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” Saul answered, “Who art thou, Lord?” and the Lord said, “I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.” Blinded by the light, Saul was led by the hand into Damascus and was led to the Lord by the disciple Ananias, who baptized him and restored his sight. His name is later changed to Paul. The former persecutor of Christians becomes a great evangelist and apologist for the Christian faith, as well as the human author of half the New Testament. The story of Saul’s conversion is so important that Luke, under divine inspiration, includes the story a total of three times: in Acts 9, 22 and 26. If Paul is not an apostle, called personally by Christ and entrusted with his gospel, then our understanding of Christ is radically altered. The Pauline epistles lose their divine authority, and we are left with a truncated New Testament of half the length. This view has been roundly rejected by the church of Jesus Christ. The whole church—Orthodox, Roman and Protestant—has the same 27 New Testament books.

What did Paul mean by “Am I not free?” (v. 1). Based upon what he had just written in the previous chapter we conclude that he was speaking of his freedom in the use of things indifferent,<sup>3</sup> such as eating cut-rate cuts of meat that had previously been offered to idols (8:4). Since the passing away of the ceremonial law (fulfilled in Christ), we as Christians are free to eat foods that are not specifically forbidden. If God’s word doesn’t tell us *not* to use something, then we have the freedom to use it. For us, as for the apostle Paul, freedom is our birthright.

In verse 2, Paul states that the members of the Corinthian church are the seal of his apostleship in the Lord. After all, the very existence of a Christian church in Corinth is the result of Paul’s patient teaching and evangelizing over a period of a year and six months, during which the core group was formed (Acts 18:11).

Beginning in verse 3 Paul writes, “My defense to those who examine me is this: Do we have no right to eat and drink? Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas [that is, Peter]? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working? Who ever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock?” When Paul asks, “Do we have no right to eat and drink?” he is asserting that a minister of the Word has a right to a comfortable livelihood supported by those who benefit from his ministry. He states this as a universal rule in verse 14: “Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, <https://nonorthodoxy.com/were-there-twelve-or-thirteen-apostles/> (accessed 9-3-22)

<sup>3</sup> John Gill *Commentary* (e-Sword)

from the gospel.” How does he prove this? By citing an obscure text from Deuteronomy 25:4, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.” This law appears quite out of nowhere in a context dealing with the responsibility of civil judges to acquit the innocent and condemn the guilty, imposing appropriate penalties. Then, following the text quoted by Paul, it goes on to the topic of the marriage of a widow to her deceased husband’s brother. The purpose of that law was to preserve the tribes intact until the coming of the Christ, who would arise from the tribe of Judah. But right between these two other topics there is this little sentence, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.” Gill observes that “the Gentiles had several [methods] of restraining their cattle from eating, while they thus made use of them, to which this law is opposed.” Some of these practices were downright cruel. God’s people were not to follow the practices of the Gentiles but be a peculiar people, holy to the Lord. They were to treat their animals—all of them, not just oxen—with respect, as creations of God. This was picked up by Solomon in the book of Proverbs, where he writes that “a righteous man regardeth the life of his beast: but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.”<sup>4</sup> The Christian, knowing that the world was created by God, has a motive for kindness, because the God who created man is kind; while the non-Christian, believing that life spontaneously appeared out of non-life, and that the process of evolution involves the survival of the fittest—a dog-eat-dog mentality—has no motive for kindness. This is not to say that no evolutionist is kind, but if he is, he is borrowing from the Christian worldview.

Now, in 1 Corinthians, Paul argues from this Old Testament case law that just as an ox treading out the grain has a right to eat the grain, so a minister of the gospel has a right to make a living from his ministry. People benefit spiritually from the ministry of the Word; therefore, should not the minister benefit materially?

Users of the internet constantly encounter paywalls, where content is restricted to subscribers, or to browsers that allow ads. The reason for paywalls is that creating content is expensive, and somebody has to pay the bills. On the other hand the Orthodox Presbyterian Church website, [opc.org](http://opc.org), is supported by voluntary contributions to Worldwide Outreach, as God’s people want to be able to offer the message of the gospel freely to anyone whose heart God has prepared.

The other right that Paul enumerates is the right of a minister to take along a believing wife (v. 5). In the original the phrase is “a sister, a wife.” “Sister” is an allusion to the church being the family of God, and fellow Christians being brothers and sisters in Christ, related to one another as members of God’s spiritual family. In his second epistle to this same church Paul will write, “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness

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<sup>4</sup> Prov. 12:10

with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?” (2 Cor. 6:14–15). Simply put, a Christian is required to marry another Christian—to marry only in the Lord. No matter how appealing a potential spouse might look, or how pleasant a personality, if the husband and wife are not united in faith, there will be no end of difficulties regarding where to worship and how to raise the children. A Christian marriage will follow Joshua’s bold declaration, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:15). Paul argues that he has a right to take along a believing wife on his missionary journeys, but he has not used this right.

In 1 Timothy Paul will write, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, *forbidding to marry*, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” (1 Tim. 4:1–3). It is difficult to reconcile these verses with the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which requires priestly celibacy. If the Bible permits ministers of the word to marry, and calls out “forbidding to marry” as a doctrine of demons, then the church cannot forbid its ministers to marry—though Christians are to marry only in the Lord.

In this section Paul enumerates his rights. As a minister of the gospel he had the right to earn a living through the gospel. He also has the right to be married. But as we will see, point 2,

## **2. Paul voluntarily relinquishes his rights.**

Paul says, “Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ” (v. 12). Again he says, “But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void” (v. 15). He wants the Corinthian church to understand that he had voluntarily relinquished his rights. Why? He did not want to hinder the gospel of Christ. Paul did not want to give his enemies any reason to attributing his zeal for the gospel to unworthy motives. He didn’t want the enemies of Christ to be able to charge that he preached the gospel only for financial gain.

This past Wednesday Norma and I had lunch with her sister and her husband in the town where the two sisters were raised. As we ate, we talked about our respective churches and ministries. There were a lot of patrons in the restaurant; it was noisy, and we had to speak up to be heard. Maybe we talked a little louder than we would have many years ago, when our hearing was better! At any rate, when we got up to leave, my brother-in-law and I went outside to enjoy the sunshine. We had no sooner exited than a man in his late forties came out and introduced himself. His name was Dan; he had heard us talk about the Lord over lunch, and it

encouraged him. He, too, is a Christian. He had been saved while in prison, and he has been out almost eleven years now. He pastors two churches and works for a demolition company. He pointed to his worksite a short distance away and said there had been two houses standing there on Monday morning when he got there. Here is a man who has no formal training but an evident zeal for the Lord. He has recently taken a young former drug addict into his home and is discipling him. This is the first time he has done that. We had a word of prayer together before we went our separate ways—he to his job site, and we to visit our dear mother-in-law. How different is Dan from men who take a pastorate based upon the salary it pays! May we all have zeal to reach people with the gospel. Remember our Lord's Great Commission, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:15–16). Why do people need to hear the gospel? It is a life-and-death matter. Those who believe and are baptized shall be saved—rescued from sin and the devil and brought into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. On the other hand, those who believe not shall be damned. Here are people who are blessed to hear the Gospel but reject it; their guilt is the greater and their punishment the more severe, because they heard the gospel yet died in a state of impenitence and unbelief.

Have you received Christ? Have you committed your life to him? Do you joyfully live for him as his disciple? You have been blessed to hear the Gospel. Oh, do not reject it!

Paul enumerates his rights, but voluntarily relinquishes his rights in order that Christ might receive the greater glory. Not every preacher is required to forego a salary or forego a Christian marriage, but this was Paul's personal choice. Why? Consider point 3,

### **3. Paul explains his heart motivation.**

He writes, "But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void." Paul has used none of the rights that were rightly his as a minister of the gospel. Moreover, he does not write now in order to shame the Corinthians into sending a contribution. Rather, he writes to expose wicked men whom two chapters later he will call "false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ" (11:13)—despicable men who use religion as a means to financial gain. He will not accept one penny of monetary support from the church at Corinth. Paul "would rather die than make void his right to boast or glory in his unremunerated work in the Church."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers*, [https://biblehub.com/commentaries/1\\_corinthians/9-15.htm](https://biblehub.com/commentaries/1_corinthians/9-15.htm) accessed 9-4-22

As Paul saw it, “*necessity* is laid upon me.” How so? Paul did not preach out of force or compulsion. He preached freely, willingly and cheerfully; no one forced him to do it. Rather, he sensed an obligation due to the divine call that he had been given. The risen Christ had personally appeared to him, had made him painfully aware of his sin, had opened his heart to call upon the name of the Lord and be saved, and had called him with the highest honor possible: to be an apostle and ambassador to the King of kings, and emissary of heaven. No wonder Paul felt a sense of necessity. He was an apostle and ambassador of Jesus Christ. He wouldn’t change places with the Roman Caesar!

But he goes on to say, “Yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!” The word for “woe” is οὐαί, an interjection denoting pain or displeasure, grief, regret or distress: *woe! alas!* Paul’s word calls to mind Isaiah’s response when he was confronted with the glory of God: “In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, *Woe is me!* for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.” When Isaiah saw the glory of God he knew that he was doomed, humanly speaking. He knew himself to be a man of unclean lips. He had formerly made fun of God’s holiness; now he saw it clearly. He knew that he had no hope apart from God touching his lips, taking away his iniquity, purging his sin. When Paul thought about the great treasure that had been entrusted to him in the Gospel, the thought that he could keep silent and not share the message of salvation with men and women, boys and girls who, apart from Christ would go to eternal perdition compelled him to say, “*Woe* is me if I do not preach the gospel!” To have a message this wonderful and keep it to himself would be unthinkable.

“Am I not an apostle?” Paul asks? “Yes,” Paul was an apostle, that is, a *sent one*. He was personally sent out by the Lord Jesus. As he testifies when he recounts how the bright light shone down from heaven on the road to Damascus, the risen Christ had told him, “Rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you ... to make you a minister and a witness .... I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.”<sup>6</sup> The office of apostle was unique. The apostles to a man were all

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<sup>6</sup> Acts 26:16–18

chosen personally by Christ. The church has no authority to choose apostles; for this reason I have come to believe that Paul was personally chosen by Christ as the twelfth apostle, to take the place of Judas Iscariot, who betrayed the Lord and went to perdition. At the end of Acts 1 the church chooses Matthias, but Matthias was not personally chosen by Christ; therefore, that leaves Paul as the twelfth apostle.

In Revelation 21 there is a description of the “great city, the holy Jerusalem.” We read that “the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” I now believe that the twelfth foundation, named after the twelfth apostle chosen by Christ, is named for Paul. Though he could have taken a salary for his ministerial labors, Paul labored willingly for the glory of God.

Brothers and sisters, we, too, can choose to voluntarily relinquish our rights for the glory of God. It might be the right to a good reputation. It might be the right to an easy life. It might be the right to a life free from pain or suffering. But whatever we give up, it will be worth it all in the end. Amen.