Chapter 10: Relinquishing our Rights

1 Corinthians 8:1–9:27

For the Christian, holy living extends beyond marriage and singleness. Rather, holiness stretches to every facet of our living, including even what we eat and drink. Certainly, the kingdom of God is *not* a matter of eating and drinking (cf. Rom. 14:17). Nevertheless, Christians must recognize that what we eat or drink may have implications that affect the way we serve the Lord, our unbelieving neighbors, and our brothers and sisters in Christ. These issues go beyond simple questions of what our rights and liberties in Christ *permit* us to do. Much more, we must ask what is *best* for us to do. How, then, do we seek to live in every area of our lives in a manner that is pleasing to the Lord? In 1 Corinthians 8–9, Paul identifies several concerns for how food may be negatively affecting the church in Corinth. Then, he makes a simple observation that should shape the entirety of how we live our lives: *it is better to be deprived of our rights than of Christ's reward*.

Eating in an Idol's Temple (1 Cor. 8:1–13)

For the third time in the letter, Paul introduces his response to the Corinthians' concerns by the phrase "Now concerning…" (1 Cor. 8:1; cf. 1 Cor. 7:1, 25; 12:1; 16:1, 12). Here, Paul addresses the question of eating food offered to idols, a question that he will address from 1 Corinthians 8–10. In some ways, the transition from issues of sexual morality and marriage to issues of food are abrupt; however, Paul mentioned the issue of food earlier within his earlier discussion of sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:13). There, Paul acknowledged that all things are indeed lawful, but he quickly reminded them that not all things are helpful, and that Christians should not be dominated by anything (1 Cor. 6:12). Furthermore, Paul observed that food has no ultimate significance in the light of the eternal destiny of our resurrected bodies (1 Cor. 6:13). In that context, Paul was writing about the liberty that God gives believers to eat food as a part of his larger discussion of God's command that forbids believers from sexual immorality.

The Limitation of Love (1 Cor. 8:1–3)

Even so, Paul acknowledged in 1 Corinthians 6 that our liberty comes with limitations. To demonstrate those limitations, Paul quoted and pushed back against slogans that the Corinthians used to justify their liberty: "All things are lawful for me" and "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food" (1 Cor. 6:12–13). Now, in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul pushes back against another slogan: "All of us possess knowledge" (1 Cor. 8:1). Like the earlier slogans, this slogan is true, as far as it goes: because there know that there is only one, true God, they have liberty to eat food that has

been offered in sacrifice to different, false gods (1 Cor. 8:4).[1] Even so, this slogan (also like the earlier slogans) misunderstands and misrepresents the implications of that truth that it attempts to reveal.

Paul, then, points out a major flaw in their position. He does not say that the *content* of their knowledge is wrong, but that the *use* of their knowledge is wrong. Their knowledge is puffing them up with pride, rather than leading them deeper into love for their fellow believers. They see their knowledge as an end in itself, while Paul points out that knowledge is only a means that leads to the holy end of love.[2] Paul has already criticized the Corinthians for being puffed up against one another, and he will do so again later in this letter (1 Cor. 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 13:4).[3] The Corinthians see their knowledge as a weapon to be wielded for their own gain, rather than as a tool to build up one another in love.[4] If we only have cold, bare theological facts, we do not know as we ought to know (1 Cor. 8:2). But, if we love God, we have true knowledge—we both *know* and *are known* (cf. 1 John 4:7–8).[5] This knowledge, of course, comes only through the mind of Christ, by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14–16).[6] It is this kind of spiritual, love-filled knowledge alone that allows us to answer thorny practical questions (like whether to eat meat sacrificed to idols) with godly wisdom.[7]

Theological Foundations (1 Cor. 8:4–6)

Before Paul explains how love should influence their thinking in this matter, he begins by affirming their thinking, as far as it goes. Again, the issue is not that the *content* of their knowledge is wrong, but only their *use* of that knowledge. As for the content, Paul affirms that the Corinthians are correct that an idol has no real existence, since there is only one, true, living God (1 Cor. 8:4). Many may be "called" gods in heaven and on earth, and, therefore, these gods and lords exist in the

---

[1] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 272. Available online: <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xv.i.html>

[2] "Mere theoretical or speculative knowledge, that is, knowledge divorced from love, tends to inflate the mind, i.e. renders it vain and conceited. It is a great mistake, therefore, to suppose that mere knowledge, without religion, elevates and refines men, or can purify society. It is essential, but it is insufficient." (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 139.)

[3] Aside from 1 Cor. 4:6 and 8:1, the ESV usually translates the word "puffed up" as "arrogant."

[4] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 407–08.

[5] Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 140–41.

[6] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 275. Available online: <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xv.i.html>

[7] "Here, then, is the γνῶσις ["knowledge"] that really counts, one that is not mere knowledge, however correct and extensive, but one that is united with and permeated by love to God, the love of true understanding and true purpose. In regard to the questions at issue among the Corinthians, Paul would say: "What is the use of mere knowledge in trying to solve these perplexing questions about idol meats? Mere knowledge gets you nowhere with your brethren or with God. Only a knowledge that is permeated with love, love that rises to God, will make him acknowledge us and our knowledge as his own. With such a γνῶσις we can solve these questions about meats offered to idols." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 336–37.)

imaginations of their many worshipers (1 Cor. 8:5).[8] Later, Paul will add that, while these idols do not represent the gods they claim to portray, worshiping idols means worshiping demons (1 Cor. 10:20).[9] On the contrary, there is only one God, the Father and one Lord, Jesus Christ. All things exist *from* God the Father and *through* the Lord Jesus Christ, and we ourselves exist *for* the Father and *through* the Lord Jesus Christ.[10] This doctrine that the Father creates and sustains *through* the Son appears elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., Prov. 8:30; John 1:3; Col. 1:16–17; Heb. 1:2).

Knowledge Used for Love (1 Cor. 8:7–13)

With those theological foundations in place, Paul turns his attention to the way in which theological knowledge should move us toward love. First, Paul observes that not all share the same knowledge—that is, the same depth of theological understanding (1 Cor. 8:7). This may be an issue of lacking the information, or, more likely, with an emotional concerns of a weak conscience. By "weak," Paul describes those who do not have a full confidence that eating food sacrificed to idols is permissible, but eat anyway. To eat apart from faith, Paul writes elsewhere, is sin (Rom. 14:23).[11] As

[8] "But Paul also recognizes the existential reality of pagan worship, and he knows that some within the Corinthian community are going to be affected by that reality. Thus he interrupts the concession with the affirmation 'as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords."' He does not intend by this that the "gods" actually exist as objective realities. Rather, as he goes on to allow (v. 7), they 'exist' subjectively in the sense that they are believed in. The two terms 'gods' and 'lords,' which set up the Christian confession that follows (v. 6), reflect the two basic forms of Greco-Roman religion as it had been modified by the coming of the Oriental cults. The 'gods' designate the traditional deities (Zeus, Athena, etc.), who are regularly given this appellation in the literature but are almost never referred to as *kyrioi* ('lords'). The term *kyrios*, on the other hand, is the normal title for the deities of the mystery cults, those religious expressions that had by this time become full-fledged competitors to the traditional *theoi* ('gods')." (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 412.)

[9] Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 142–43.

[10] "The Father is the first person of the Godhead, he is called Father in relation to the Son, in relation to all creatures as being their Creator, and in relation to us as being his children in Christ Jesus. Because he is the Creator and is called so *per eminentiam* ['emphatically'] in the Scriptures, Paul writes: 'of whom are all things,'….Paul mentions 'we particularly because of our special relation to the Father: 'we for him' with our entire being directed toward him in faith, love, worship, etc.

While Paul might have stopped with the mention of the Father he continues, 'And one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and we through him.' He does this mainly for one reason, viz., because he has above said 'lords many.' While the title Κύριος [*kyrios*; 'Lord'] is bestowed upon the Godhead as such and upon the Father as the first person, it is also and eminently, as here, bestowed upon the Son. Already this shows that the Son is true God, unabridged and not subordinate to the Father. His person and his official name is 'Jesus Christ,' not only because this is precious to all Christians, but also to designate him as the incarnate Son and our Redeemer." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 340.)

[11] "A *weak* conscience is one which either regards as wrong what is not in fact so; or one which is not clear and decided in its judgments. According to the Scriptures, 'whatever is not of faith is sin,' Rom. 14, 23; therefore whatever a man does, thinking it is wrong, or doubtful whether it be wrong or not, to him it is sin. Thus the man who eats an idol-sacrifice, uncertain whether he is doing right or not, defiles his conscience. The conscience is said to be defiled, either when it approves or cherishes sin, or when it is burdened by a sense of guilt. The latter form of pollution is that here intended. The man who acts in the way supposed feels guilty, and is really guilty." (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 146.)

Calvin writes, "For as the excellence of actions depends on the fear of God and integrity of conscience, so, on the other hand, there is no action, that is so good in appearance, as not to be polluted by a corrupt affection of the mind."[12] In this case, Paul is not so much thinking of someone with a lack of knowledge about what kind of food is permissible, but of someone with emotional and spiritual baggage from their former association with idolatry, when their eating was a part of their idolatrous worship.

Second, Paul reminds the Corinthians that food does *not* commend us to God, so that we are neither better nor worse off if we eat (1 Cor. 8:8). Paul had made the same point, although perhaps not as strongly, earlier in this letter in 1 Corinthians 6:13. Also, in Romans 14:17, Paul writes, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Eating specific foods may be permissible according to Christian liberty, but eating is certainly not a requirement.

Third, Paul offers a concrete situation in which eating may indeed become a stumbling block for a weaker brother. If a weaker, less mature brother sees a Christian "with knowledge" eating in an idol's temple, that weaker brother may be "encouraged" to do the same thing. Literally, the word that the ESV translates as "encouraged" is "built up," the same word that Paul used in v. 1: "love *builds up*." Rather than using knowledge to build up this weaker believer in love, Paul is showing how such a use of "knowledge" would *build up* a weaker believer toward sin! The consequences could be disastrous if a weak believer were thus drawn back, through a simple meal, into the larger scene of idolatrous worship.[13] In that society, idolatrous temples were not only places of worship, but places where much social interaction took place *in the context* of idolatrous worship, Thus, any "kind of occasion, public or private, when people were likely to come together socially was the kind of occasion when a sacrifice was appropriate."[14] The newer Christian who had taken the costly step of separating from temple life could be easily sucked back into that world of pagan worship, and Paul wants to avoid this at all costs.

What does Paul mean when he warns that the weak person may be "destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died"? (1 Cor. 8:11)? Does this mean that a true believer, "for whom Christ died," can

---

[12] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 280. Available online: <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xv.i.html>

[13] "Verses 10–12 offer a specific description of how Paul imagines the possible damage inflicted on the community by those who want to eat the idol meat. The weak will see the *gnōsis*-boasters ['knowledge-boasters'] eating *in the temple of an idol* and be influenced, contrary to their own consciences, to participate in the same practice (v. 10). This is a very important statement, because it shows that Paul's primary concern here is not the consumption of meat sold in the marketplace (cf. 10:25–26); rather, he is worried about having weak Christians drawn back into the temple, into the powerful world of the pagan cult, which was, we must always remember, the dominant symbolic world in which the Corinthians Christians lived. In verse 11 Paul states the dire consequences of such cultural compromise: The weak will be 'destroyed.' This language should not be watered down. The concern is not that the weak will be *offended* by the actions of the *gnōsis*-boasters; Paul's concern is, rather, that they will become alienated from Christ and fall away from the sphere of God's saving power, being sucked back into their former way of life." (Hays, *First Corinthians, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 141–42.)

[14] Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 122.

somehow lose their salvation? Certainly not, although this does not reduce the severity of what Paul is saying. To begin, we may observe that it is possible to read this statement as a rhetorical question, as the KJV has it: "And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?" Even if we don't take this as a rhetorical question, it is at least clear that Paul is illustrating the potential damage that may come by flaunting Christian liberty without necessarily making a clear theological statement about the nature of apostasy.

Even so, while it is true that there is a sense in which Christ died exclusively for the elect (who cannot fall from their salvation), there is also a sense in which Christ died for the whole world.[15] Christ's death is *sufficient* for all, but *efficient* for only God's elect. While many hear the outward call of the gospel and may even experience "some common operations of the Spirit," only the elect experience God's effectual call by the Spirit, from which they cannot ultimately fall away.[16] Even the elect, however, may be "destroyed" in the sense of incurring God's displeasure, grieving his Holy Spirit, coming to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, having their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded, hurting and scandalizing others, and bringing temporal judgments on themselves.[17] To lead a brother into sin is not only to sin against your brother, but to sin against Christ himself (1 Cor. 8:12). Love, instead, should lead us to relinquish our rights, if necessary for the good of our brothers (1 Cor. 8:13).

Conclusions about Eating Food Sacrificed to Idols

There are two important conclusions we should take from 1 Corinthians 8. First, we should note that Paul is *not* saying that, if there were no "weak" brethren, the Corinthians could freely eat in the idol temples. Paul will later say that eating at the table of an idol is to partake of the table of demons (1 Cor. 10:21). For now, though, Paul is making another, simpler argument: this action fails on the basis of its lovelessness.[18] The question isn't simply whether some action *may* be justified on some

[15] "This passage, therefore, is perfectly consistent with those numerous passages which teach that Christ's death secures the salvation of all those who were given to him in the covenant of redemption. There is, however, a sense in which it is scriptural to say that Christ died for all men. This is very different from saying that he died *equally* for all men, or that his death had no other reference to those who are saved than it had to those who are lost. To die *for one* is to die for his benefit. As Christ's death has benefited the whole world, prolonged the probation of men, secured for them innumerable blessings, provided a righteousness sufficient and suitable for all, it may be said that he died for all. And in reference to this obvious truth the language of the apostle, should any prefer this interpretation, may be understood, 'Why should we destroy one for whose benefit Christ laid down his life?' All this is perfectly consistent with the great scriptural truth that Christ came into the world to save his people, that his death renders certain the salvation of all those whom the Father hath given him, and therefore that he died not only *for* them but *in their place*, and on the condition that they should never die." (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 149–50.)

[16] *Westminster Larger Catechism* #68.

[17] *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 17.3.

[18] "It should be noted that despite the way the argument proceeds—food as a matter of indifference, the consideration of the weak conscience of another, the implication that they do have 'rights' in this matter—the section as a whole has the net effect of prohibition. Some have asserted that if there were no 'weak' brother or sister to see the action of those 'with knowledge,' then the latter might participate in the cultic meals as they wished. But Paul's ensuing argument (10:1–22) quite disallows such an interpretation. Thus the two sections

theological grounds. Instead, the issues go much deeper: in this *specific* situation, would this action be loving to a weaker brother? If not, then to press forward in the name of Christian liberty is to sin against the brother and even against the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Second, we should also notice that Paul does not combat the "knowledge" of the Corinthians by urging them toward *less* knowledge, but toward *more* and *better* knowledge. Paul isn't urging them avoid gaining knowledge, but to think more carefully through *all* the implications of their knowledge. So far, the Corinthians have used their knowledge to search out loopholes to justify what *they* may do. Instead, Paul urges them to use their knowledge to identify ways to build up their brothers in love, not toward sin. We should not imagine that "love" looks like an ignorant physician with a really good bedside manner, but as a well-trained physician who thinks carefully about the patient to make sure that he understands their ailments, what will make their situation worse, and how to cure them. God gives theological knowledge in order to lead us into love for the benefit of others, not so that we might search out loopholes for our own benefit.

Willingness to Relinquish Rights (1 Cor. 9:1–14)

Admittedly, Paul's willingness to relinquish his rights in the area of eating meat would be a difficult example to follow. For this reason, Paul demonstrates that his own willingness to lay down his rights for the benefit of others goes far beyond merely his diet. In chapter 9, Paul argues that his willingness to relinquish his rights characterizes his entire lifestyle in every area, especially in the rights and privileges to which he might otherwise lay claim as an apostle of Jesus Christ.[19] While the Corinthians operate on the assumption that anyone who possesses rights and privileges would certainly exercise their prerogatives, Paul decides whether to exercise his rights according to whether doing so would edify those around him.[20] As David Garland puts it, "He is basically free from the way of the world, which is accustomed to persons holding the whip over others who are weaker and lording it over them as a badge of their freedom and honor."[21] On the contrary, Paul lives according to Christ's principle that the greatest in the kingdom is the servant of all (Matt. 20:25–28; Mark 10:42–45; Luke 22:25–27).

Paul's Status as an Apostle (1 Cor. 9:1–2)

Thus, Paul asks the Corinthians to consider whether he himself is not free—both as a Christian, and, more, as an apostle (1 Cor. 9:1).[22] By putting the question rhetorically ("Am I not an apostle?"), Paul poses his apostleship as a premise that he does not expect the Corinthians to challenge.[23] Paul does go on to assert two important pieces of evidence to support the genuineness of his apostleship,

(8:7–13; 10:1–22) indicate that going to the temples is wrong in two ways: it is not acting in love (8:7–13), and it involves fellowship with demons (10:19–22)." (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 417–18.)

[19] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 287–88. Available online: <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xvi.i.html>

[20] Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 199–200.

[21] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 404.

[22] Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 152–53.

[23] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 398.

but without the kind of effort to draw out the implications of that evidence that we might expect if his apostleship were in doubt. (This will become an important observation when we try to understand v. 3.) Specifically, Paul reminds the Corinthians that he has seen "Jesus our Lord" (1 Cor. 9:1). The primary responsibility of the apostles was to serve as eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22), with the ability to give firsthand testimony to the doctrine that Jesus himself taught (Acts 1:8; 10:39; 22:15; Gal. 1:12).[24] Then, Paul once again reminds the Corinthians that he himself had planted their church, and points to their existence as evidence of God's work through his ministry (1 Cor. 3:5–10).[25] Although others may have reason for doubting his apostleship, Paul's work in establishing the church at Corinth is a confirming "seal" of his apostleship in the Lord (1 Cor. 9:2).[26]

The Rights of an Apostle (1 Cor. 9:3–7)

Earlier, we observed that Paul does not seem to expect a challenge to his assertion of his apostleship. The little he does to remind the Corinthians of his apostleship would not be enough to convince a skeptic, but only to remind those who are already convinced. This observation is important for understanding the nature of Paul's "defense" in v. 3. The fact that Paul has not gone to very great lengths to defend his apostleship suggests that the "this…defense" does not refer to what he has just written. Instead, "this…defense" more likely refers to what Paul goes on to say through

[24] Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 153.

[25] "*Are not ye my work?* He now, in the *second* place, establishes his Apostleship from the effect of it, because he had gained over the Corinthians to the Lord by the gospel. Now this is a great thing that Paul claims for himself, when he calls their conversion *his work*, for it is in a manner a new creation of the soul. But how will this correspond with what we had above — that *he that planteth is nothing, and he that watereth is nothing*? (1 Corinthians 3:7.) I answer, that as God is the efficient cause, while man, with his preaching, is an instrument that can do nothing of itself, we must always speak of the efficacy of the ministry in such a manner that the entire praise of the work may be reserved for God alone. But in some cases, when the ministry is spoken of, man is compared with God, and then that statement holds good — *He that planteth is nothing, and he that watereth is nothing*; for what can be left to a man if he is brought into competition with God? Hence Scripture represents ministers as nothing in comparison with God; but when the ministry is simply treated of without any comparison with God, then, as in this passage, its efficacy is honorably made mention of, with signal encomiums. For, in that case, the question is not, what man can do of himself without God, but, on the contrary, God himself, who is the author, is conjoined with the instrument, and the Spirit's influence with man's labor. In other words, the question is not, what man himself accomplishes by his own power, but what God effects through his hands." (Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 289. Available online: <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xvi.i.html>)

[26] "The conversion of men is a divine work, and those by whom it is accomplished are thereby authenticated as divine messengers. It is as much the work of God as a miracle, and therefore, when duly authenticated, has the same effect as an evidence of a divine commission. This, although valid evidence, and as such adduced by the apostle, is nevertheless very liable to be abused. First, because much which passes for conversion is spurious; and secondly, because the evidence of success is often urged in behalf of the errors of preachers, when that success is due to the truth which they preach. Still there are cases when the success is of such a character, so undeniable and so great, as to superseded the necessity of any other evidence of a divine call. Such was the case with the apostles, with the reformers, and with many of our modern missionaries." (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 153–54.)

the rest of this chapter: namely, that Paul has certain rights as an apostle of Jesus.[27]

So, Paul asks several more rhetorical questions about his *rights* in v. 4–7. The word "right" (*exousia*) is the same word Paul used in 1 Corinthians 8:9: "But take care that this *right* of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." The Corinthians used the word to assert their *freedom* to eat meat sacrificed to idols, but here, Paul uses the word to emphasize his *authority* that he would have the *right* to assert.[28] Does Paul not have the right to eat and drink—that is, to receive financial support so that he is free to devote himself to ministry (1 Cor. 9:4)?[29] Does he not have the right to take along a believing wife, like the other apostles (1 Cor. 9:5)?[30] Do Paul and Barnabas alone not have the right to refrain from working a trade (1 Cor. 9:6)? In each of these questions, Paul phrases the Greek in such a way to demonstrate that he expects a negative answer: "You certainly don't believe this, do you?"[31] Paul's apostleship gives him just as much of a right to receive food and drink, to take along a wife, and to refrain from working his trade, as any of the other apostles have.

In v. 7, Paul makes the same point with three quick illustrations. No soldier serves at his own expense. No vineyard worker labors without eating of the fruit. No shepherd tends a block without sharing in the milk. No one ever expects workers to labor without sharing in the benefit of their labor. Paul's point is that apostles too have the right to expect to share in the fruit of their ministry. This is the right that Paul is most concerned about: the right of apostles to receive financial support for their ministry. What Paul touches on here he will develop more fully in the next section.

Spiritual Sowing; Material Reaping (1 Cor. 9:8–14)

While Paul has largely argued intuitively, from human experience, he insists that his point goes

---

[27] "Stylistically considered, Paul's writings have no second instance in which the form of οὗτος, 'this,' when it is placed at the end of the sentence, refers to a preceding statement. But weightier than this strong linguistic proof is the thought which Paul presents. He is here not proving to doubters or questioners that he is truly an apostle. His letter is not to be sent to the address of the 'others' who know nothing about him but to the Corinthians. Nor is the question at issue this, whether Paul is an apostle or not; the Corinthians raise no such question, for they themselves are Paul's seal of apostleship. The question on which Paul proposes to stand an examination is the one regarding Christian liberty, whether he has this liberty to the fullest degree and yet in practice can exercise all manner of restraint. In order to answer this question Paul is writing to the Corinthians; this he wants to clear up from them. And in this effort he uses himself as an example." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 353.)

[28] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 444.

[29] Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 182–83.

[30] "The comparisons are as intriguing as they are brief. As what Paul says later makes certain (15:7), for him the word 'apostle' was not confined to the Twelve. It is therefore quite impossible to know who all would be included in 'the rest of the apostles.' Equally intriguing is his setting forth 'the Lord's brothers' in this way. This refers to Mary's other children, some of whom are mentioned by name in the Synoptic tradition (Mark 6:3; Matt. 13:55). This passage makes clear that, even though they had questions during his earthly ministry (Mark 3:31; John 7:3; but cf. 2:12), they eventually came to believe in Jesus as Lord and were among his earliest followers after the resurrection (cf. Acts 1:14). How widely they may have traveled and how well known they were in the churches remains a mystery." (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 445–46.)

[31] "The signal that the expected answer is "no" is the interrogative participle μή…." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 355.)

beyond mere human logic. Rather, Paul observes that the Law of Moses itself teaches this principle in Deuteronomy 25:4: "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." By this verse, Paul insists that God does not speak for the sake of oxen, but for our sake, to teach that gospel workers should not be refused material support after sowing spiritual things by preaching God's word. Now, Paul's method of interpretation here does not line up intuitively with the way that we read the Law. How, then, is Paul using this Old Testament passage?

Importantly, Paul is not rejecting the historical sense of this verse by turning it into a purely spiritualized allegory.[32] Instead, there are probably three important principles to keep in mind to understand what exactly Paul is saying. First, Martin Luther simply observes that "oxen cannot read."[33] What God has written *about* oxen is not for the *sake* of oxen, but for our sake as we put oxen to work. Second, then, Paul is arguing that an *application* of what God has written *about* oxen should lead us to care also for gospel workers in our midst.[34] This does not diminish what this law means for oxen, but simply means that we must understand God's wider purposes in the law that teach us principles to extend beyond the bare letter of the law. Third, Richard Hays observes that, in the original context of this law in Deuteronomy 24–25, "almost all serve to promote dignity and justice for human beings; the one verse about the threshing ox sits oddly in this context."[35] Therefore, the original context itself gives a good argument in favor of applying this verse to support the sustaining of ministers of the gospel.

In v. 12b, Paul breaks a thought into his argument that he will develop more fully in v. 15–27. Namely, Paul is not arguing all of this to demand something from the Corinthians. In fact, he is underscoring the *existence* of his right in order to highlight the fact that he refuses to *make use* of that right. Instead, Paul will endure anything rather than putting an obstacle that would hinder the progress of the gospel: "Paul's word for *hinder* is unusual (here only in the New Testament). It means 'a cutting into', and was used of breaking up a road to prevent the enemy's advance. Paul had avoided doing anything that might prevent a clear road for the gospel advance."[36] Before moving on to developing that argument more fully, Paul concludes with two more points. First, temple workers in all religions (both the Jewish old covenant temple system, as well as pagan temple systems) share in the sacrifices of the altar (1 Cor. 7:13). Furthermore, Paul clinches his argument by reminding them that Jesus himself commanded that ministers of the gospel should get their living by the gospel (cf. Matt. 10:10; Luke 10:7).[37] Paul piles up these arguments not to gain something, but to point out how he has relinquished his rights for the sake of the others' coming to know the gospel.[38]

---

[32] Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 158.

[33] Cited in Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 361.

[34] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 450–51.

[35] Hays, *First Corinthians*, 151.

[36] Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 134.

[37] "Paul does not actually quote the saying of Jesus, but he probably has in mind the tradition preserved in Luke 10:7 as part of the commissioning of the seventy to proclaim the kingdom of God: 'The laborer is worthy of his wages' (cf. Matt. 10:10). (Interestingly, 1 Tim. 5:17–18 quotes this same saying alongside Deut. 25:4 to teach that elders who rule well in the church should get 'double-honor,' i.e., extra pay.)" (Hays, First Corinthians, 152.)

[38] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 416.

Free Servanthood in the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:15–27)

Paul makes his intention not to exercise his rights in the gospel explicitly clear in v. 15. First, Paul emphatically insists that *he* has not made use of any of these rights that he mentioned above.[39] Second, Paul clarifies that he has not written any of this in order to *begin* making use of those rights. Third, Paul becomes so passionate about his insistence upon giving up his rights that, in the Greek, he actually breaks off a thought in mid-sentence in a manner that is not captured in our English translations: "I would rather die than—no one will empty my boasting!"[40] That is, Paul would rather *die* by relinquishing his rights than *live* by exercising those rights (v. 14).[41] Paul is adamant that he does not insist upon these rights because he wants to make use of them. The Lord's command that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel is a command for the givers, without any obligation for the minister to receive the support.[42]

Paul's Boasting (1 Cor. 9:15–16)

Instead, Paul wants to preserve his ground for *boasting* or *glorying*. Paul has already differentiated between false boasting in one's own power and wisdom, as opposed to true boasting in *God's* power and wisdom, as revealed through the person and work of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:29–31).[43] What, then, does Paul mean by speaking of *his* "ground for boasting" (v. 15, 16)? Paul notes that "necessity is laid upon me" (v. 16). For Paul, this means far more than an inner sense of "calling" toward preaching the gospel, since Christ uniquely captured Paul as his slave (cf. 1 Cor. 7:22), commissioning and commanding Paul to serve as his apostle (Acts 9:1–19).[44] Therefore, while Paul may be "free" in some sense (1 Cor. 9:1), Paul does not mean that he has the freedom *not* to preach the gospel.[45] Necessity is laid upon him by the direct command of Christ, his master. Woe to him if he does not preach the gospel (v. 16)! If he did not preach the gospel, he would be judged as harshly and severely as the faithless servant in Jesus' parable of the Talents/Minas (Matt. 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27).[46]

---

[39] "Paul's *I* is emphatic. Whatever the practice of others, *he* has not exercised his rights." (Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 135.)

[40] "We may imagine Paul dictating the letter, reaching a peak of white-hot fervor with *I would rather die than* —, and realizing mid-flow that he must keep to the subject. Most English versions smooth the syntax away into something blander and less passionate." (Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 141.)

[41] "'To die' (ἀποθανεῖν, *apothanein*) is parallel to the infinitive 'to live' (ζῆν, *zēn*) in 9:14. The sentence may be completed thus: 'It is better for me rather to die than to live off the gospel.' Living off the gospel would mean death to his whole understanding of his prophetic calling and his reason for being." (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 422.)

[42] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 458.

[43] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 422–23.

[44] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 462–63.

[45] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 424.

[46] Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 371.

Paul's Reward (1 Cor. 9:17–18)

Therefore, Paul may not ask *whether* he should preach the gospel. Rather, he may only ask *how* he may preach the gospel. If he preaches willingly, he will have a reward; however, even if he is unwilling to preach, his unwillingness in no way detracts from the stewardship entrusted to him (v. 17). He is nothing more than an unworthy servant who can only do his duty (cf. Luke 17:7–10).[47] Specifically, he is a servant given managerial oversight over the household of God in the church: a *steward*. Paul stated the same thing earlier: "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and *stewards* of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1). As a steward, his commission is to dispense the provisions of the household to the members of the household. In Paul's case, he dispenses the provisions of Christ's household by preaching the gospel—a commission he cannot ignore.[48] By this, Paul is not saying that he views his apostleship as only an obligation, from which he would prefer to be released. On the contrary, Paul relishes the stewardship entrusted to him.[49] His only point is that, even if he *didn't* want the stewardship, his desires would make no difference.

What, then, is the "reward" Paul stands to gain if he preaches willingly (v. 18)? Certainly, this reward has nothing to do with any merit that Paul would earn for himself so that he might boast before the Lord (cf. 1 Cor. 1:29).[50] Instead, Paul considers his ability to preach the gospel free of charge as a reward in itself (v. 18): "his pay is to serve without pay!"[51] If Paul makes "full use of [his] right in the gospel" (v. 18), he would be forfeiting this ability to preach without payment. While Paul's reward does not make sense according to the wisdom of the world, Paul's point seems clear: by preaching the gospel without receiving payment, Paul's "own ministry becomes a living paradigm of the gospel itself."[52] Paul is following after the very example of his Master, who made himself poor so that we might become rich by his poverty (2 Cor. 8:9). Far from putting up an obstacle in front of the gospel by requiring payment for his services (1 Cor. 9:12), Paul does whatever it takes to speed ahead the progress of the gospel wherever he serves. The joy of seeing the growth of the gospel is reward in itself for Paul.

Servant of All (1 Cor. 9:19–20)

Paradoxically, then, Paul uses his freedom *from* all to make himself a servant *to* all (1 Cor. 9:19). Paul's reasons are twofold: (1) his greatest desire is to win more people to faith in Christ (1 Cor. 9:19); and (2) by taking the form of a servant, Paul follows in the mindset of the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:5–7).[53] To demonstrate this commitment, Paul then describes the way he has related to

---

[47] Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 162.

[48] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 424–25.

[49] Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 157.

[50] "If, says he, my preaching is optional, *I have a reward*; not in the sense of merit in the sight of God, but in the general sense of recompense. He gained something by it. He gained the confidence even of his enemies. But as preaching was not optional but obligatory, he did not gain confidence by it. Mere preaching, therefore, was not a (καύχημα) ground of boasting, but preaching gratuitously was." (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 162.)

[51] Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 136.

[52] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 465.

[53] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 470–71.

various groups of people, beginning with the Jews. Although Paul himself was born a Jew, he must accommodate his behavior in order to become "as a Jew" (1 Cor. 9:20). Then, when Paul speaks of "those under the law" (1 Cor. 9:20), he is most likely still referring to the Jews.[54] When Paul states that he became "as a Jew," he means that he acted as "one under the law," even though Paul quickly clarifies that he is *not* under the law. Thus, acting "as a Jew" refers to participating in the various aspects of the ceremonial law that were fulfilled in Christ.[55] Wherever *Christians* insisted that keeping the ceremonial law was required in order to become a Christian, Paul opposed such teaching adamantly; however, wherever Paul could build bridges with *Jews* by observing the ceremonial law alongside of them, Paul was eager to do so.[56]

Applying the Law (1 Cor. 9:21)

Likewise, for those outside the law (i.e., pagan Gentiles), Paul insists that he was just as flexible in leaving behind the ceremonial law altogether, becoming "as one outside the law" (1 Cor. 9:21). Once again, though, Paul quickly clarifies his relationship to God's law. By living "as one outside the law," Paul does not mean that he lived altogether *lawlessly*, in the sense of *wickedly*.[57] That is, he does not mean that he, like the Corinthians, is pressing the outer limits of the slogan, "All things are lawful for me" (1 Cor. 6:12).[58] In the context of the previous verse, Paul means that he lives only outside the *ceremonial* law, since he is *not* outside the "law of God," but indeed "under the law of

---

[54] "*To those under the law*. These were not converted Jews, because they were already gained to the gospel, and did not need to be won, which is the sense in which the expression *to gain* is used in this verse, as he had just spoken of gaining the Jews. Perhaps *those under the law*, as distinguished from the Jews, were proselytes, i.e. Gentiles who had embraced Judaism. But most of these proselytes were not strictly *under the law*. They acknowledged Jehovah to be the only true God, but did not subject themselves to the Mosaic institutions. The common opinion is, that this clause is only explanatory of the former, 'To the Jews, i.e. to those under the law, I became as a Jews, i.e. as one under the law.'" (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 164–65.)

[55] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 305. Available online: <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xvi.ii.html>

[56] "How can a Jew determine to 'become *like* a Jew'? The obvious answer is, In matters that have to do with Jewish religious peculiarities, which Paul as a disciple of the Risen One had long ago given up as having any bearing on one's relationship with God. These would include circumcision (7:19; Gal. 6:15), food laws (8:8; Gal. 2:10–13; Rom. 14:17; Col. 2:16), and special observances (Col. 2:16). On these questions not only was Paul himself free; he also took a thoroughly polemical stance toward any who would impose such requirements on Gentile converts. On the other hand, he had no such problem with Jewish converts continuing such practices, as long as they were not considered to give people right standing, or special advantages, with God. Nor did he exhibit unwillingness to yield to Jewish customs for the sake of the Jews (cf. Acts 16:1–3; 21:23–26). Although one cannot be certain, from the general context as well as the clear parallels with what will come later (10:23–33) one may infer that food laws are the specific issue here, especially the prohibition against eating marketplace food because of its associations with idolatry. Paul himself felt free to eat such food, as his concluding word (10:23–30) makes certain. The present text suggests that he also willingly refrained when he was in more strictly Jewish settings. It is probably this conduct, more than any other, to which his Corinthian opponents took exception." (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 472–73.)

[57] Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 160.

[58] Hays, *First Corinthians*, 154.

Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21). Paul speaks of the "law of Christ" elsewhere only in Galatians 6:2: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." In that context, it is clear that Paul does not mean that Christ has given us some *new* law, but that the "law of Christ" refers to *love* as the fulfilling of the whole moral law, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments (Gal. 5:14; cf. John 13:34; Rom. 13:8, 10; Jas. 2:8).

Believers are neither condemned or justified on the basis of our obedience to the moral law, since we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone. Nevertheless, there are many important, ongoing benefits of the moral law for believers:

> Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of his obedience. It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin: and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve; and what afflictions, in this life, they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law. The promises of it, in like manner, show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works. So as, a man's doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one, and deterreth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law; and, not under grace.[59]

While not justified or condemned by the moral law, justified believers in Christ are still bound and directed by the whole "law of the Ten Commandments, as a rule of life, in the hand of a Mediator."[60]

---

[59] *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 19.6. All of chapter 19 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* is helpful for understanding the various uses of the term "law" as it is laid down throughout Scripture.

[60] "The Law of Works, the Law of Faith, and the Law of Christ. These terms are scriptural, as appears from the whole texts quoted by our author, namely, 'Where is boasting then? it is excluded. By what law? of works? nay: but by the law of faith' (Rom. 3:27). 'Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ' (Gal. 6:2). By the law of works is meant the law of the Ten Commandments, as the covenant of works. By the law of faith, the gospel, or covenant of grace; for justification being the point upon which the apostle there states the opposition betwixt these two laws, it is evident that the former only is the law that doth not exclude boasting; and that the latter only is, by which a sinner is justified in a way that doth exclude boasting. By the law of Christ, is meant the same law of the Ten Commandments, as a rule of life, in the hand of a Mediator, to believers already justified, and not any one command of the law only; for 'bearing one another's burdens' is a 'fulfilling of the law of Christ,' as it is a loving one another: but, according to the Scripture, that love is not a fulfilling of one command only, but of the whole law of the ten commands. 'He that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thous shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself; therefore love is the fulfilling

All Things to All People (1 Cor. 9:22–23)

By stating that he became weak to win (or, "gain") the "weak" (1 Cor. 9:22), Paul brings the thrust of this message back to his earlier context of those with weakened consciences about eating meat sacrificed to idols (cf. 1 Cor. 8:7–13).[61] As R. C. H. Lenski notes, "We now see why Paul selects the verb 'gain' when he writes this refrain. It is wider in force than 'save.' The weak are saved, indeed, because they are Christians, but they can be gained for greater strength, and for an advance in knowledge and in faith."[62] This is what Paul has been driving toward, since the Corinthians had not given much thought to the well-being of the weak in their midst. In closing, Paul summarizes all of his varied actions under a single principle: "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). We should notice Paul's humility in recognizing that, while he must make every effort possible, all his efforts will only benefit *some* who will come to faith.[63] This limited success does not for a moment detract from the value of the work. Paul does what he does for the sake of the gospel, with an eye toward sharing in the blessings of the gospel—a desire that Paul may not presumptuously take for granted.[64]

Running to Win the Prize (1 Cor. 9:24)

At this point, we might ask: Why *couldn't* Paul take for granted his prospects at sharing in the blessings of the gospel? Surely if anyone were well assured of their status in Christ, it would be Paul. Not only has Paul personally seen the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 9:1–19), but he has also suffered much for the sake of bearing witness to Christ (2 Cor. 11:22–29). Even so, Paul insists that only those who persevere to the end will be saved.[65] C. K. Barnett summarizes the point of v. 24 well: "entry does not in itself guarantee a prize: it does so neither in athletics, nor in Christianity."[66]

---

of the law' (Rom. 13:8–10). It is a fulfilling of the second table directly, and of the first table indirectly and consequentially: therefore, by the law of Christ is meant, not only command only, but the whole law.

The law of works is the law to be done, that one may be saved; the law of faith is the law to be believed, that one may be saved; the law of Christ is the law of the Saviour, binding his saved people to all the duties of obedience, (Gal. 3:12, Acts 16:31)." (Thomas Boston, "Notes," in Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2009), 48.)

[61] Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 161.

[62] Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 379–80.

[63] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 306–07. Available online: <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xvi.ii.html>

[64] "Paul does not mean, 'a partner with the Gospel' (in the work of salvation; this would require αὐτῷ, not αὐτοῦ); nor does he mean 'one who shares in the work of (preaching) the Gospel'. His word means participation in (the benefits of) the Gospel; and his participation is not guaranteed (cf. verse 27). He addresses his readers, and those whom he would win for Christ, as one who stands with, not over against them. The Gospel has been entrusted to him (verse 17; cf. iv. 1; Gal. ii. 7), but it has not been put under his control. It is in fulfilling his own vocation as an evangelist that he appropriates the Gospel himself. This observation provides the transition to the last sub-paragraph in this chapter." (Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 216.)

[65] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 308. Available online: <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xvi.iii.html>

[66] Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 217.

In the next chapter, Paul will make clear that some who begin to follow Christ may be disqualified before reaching glory, just as some Israelites were overthrown in the wilderness before reaching the Promised Land (1 Cor. 10:1–5). This paragraph at the end of chapter 9, then, functions as a stern warning to keep the Corinthians from suffering the same condemnation by beginning the race, but failing to persevere.[67] Paul is not saying that *only one* Christian will gain the prize of glory, but rather that *every* Christian who seeks the prize of glory must run faithfully in order to obtain it (1 Cor. 9:24).[68]

Self-Control in All Things (1 Cor. 9:25–27a)

What, then, is required of every Christian who seeks the imperishable glory of Christ? Paul explains that every Christian must exercise "self-control in all things" (1 Cor. 9:25), just as every athlete does. Paul used this same word for "self-control" earlier in 1 Corinthians 7:9 to describe the gift of continency, which gives some Christians the ability not only to remain celibate, but even to control normal human desires for sexual intimacy. This is not an exertion of merely human strength, since Paul elsewhere calls "self-control" one of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). While God does not give every Christian the gift of continency, Paul is here explaining that God, by his Holy Spirit, does give every true Christian *increasing* self-control so that we experience a *decreasing* desire for evil (1 Cor. 10:6). Christian self-control is not only mastery over our actions, but growing self-control "in all things"—from out outward actions all the way down to our inward desires. If athletes can exercise such self-control to win a perishable wreath, how much more should Christians pursue self-control in order to gain an imperishable crown (1 Cor. 9:25)?

Therefore, Christians cannot afford to live "aimlessly" or to "box as one beating the air" (1 Cor. 9:26). Paul's meaning is clear when he describes a runner moving aimlessly, without any clear direction, and, therefore, without any significant drive to reach the unknown destination. Paul's second image of boxing "as one beating the air," however, is clear enough generally speaking, but more difficult to understand precisely. Some have suggested that this may refer to "shadow-boxing" as a part of training leading up to the fight, or else of swinging and missing in the middle of the fight.[69] I think Thomas Schreiner offers a better explanation that matches the idea of running aimlessly when he writes, "Effective boxers do not exhaust themselves by striking the air, but direct their blows at their opponents. So, too, believers exercise the requisite discipline in their lives, living with intentionality and design."[70] At a minimum, this means that we must do everything we can, by the grace of God, to root out any sin that remains in our lives. Beyond that, however, this also suggests that we must carefully evaluate the purpose of every facet in our lives, whether or not something may be categorized as "sin."[71] If not, we run the risk of running aimlessly or swinging our

---

[67] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 479–80.

[68] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 308. Available online: <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xvi.iii.html>

[69] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 483–84.

[70] Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 195.

[71] "The athlete denies himself many lawful pleasures and the Christian must similarly avoid not only definite sin, but anything that hinders spiritual progress." (Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 138.)

fists without striking a blow.

For this reason, Paul insists that should not only discipline our bodies, but even "enslave" (ESV: "keep…under control") our bodies for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:27). Paul does not mean that our bodies themselves are evil. Instead, as Charles Hodge explains, "The body, as in part the seat and organ of sin, is used for our whole sinful nature. Rom. 8, 13. It was not merely his sensual nature that Paul endeavoured to bring into subjection, but all the evil propensities and passions of his heart."[72] Sin has corrupted the entirety of our nature, and sin continually attempts to distract and divert us from the gospel at every turn in our lives. Even so, we can only serve God *in* and *through* our bodies.[73] Therefore, our goal is not to separate ourselves from our bodies, but rather to discipline our bodies from the inside out, by the grace of God. Paul makes the same point elsewhere when he writes, "[12] Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. [13] Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness" (Rom. 6:12–13).

Avoiding Disqualification (1 Cor. 9:27b)

This is a matter of deadly serious significance, so that Paul warns of the possibility that he himself might be "disqualified" from sharing in the blessings of the gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 9:23) even after spending so much time preaching about that gospel to other people. What does Paul mean by this? It is possible to read this warning in the context of 1 Corinthians 3:15, where Paul spoke of the Christian whose labor is burned up in the coming fire of God's judgment: "he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire." If so, as Leon Morris argues, "Paul's fear was not that he might lose his salvation, but that he might suffer loss through failing to satisfy his Lord (cf. 3:15)."[74] On the other hand, Paul is about to talk about the dangers of failing to enter into God's promised salvation in the next chapter, and the word for "disqualified" most often warns against dead faith that cannot save.[75] As David Garland writes, "Paul is fully aware that delivering the message of

---

[72] Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 169.

[73] "One other point may also require clarification. Throughout this letter, Paul resists the Corinthians' tendency to deprecate the body, and the present passage is no exception. While Paul speaks of 'punishing' and 'enslaving' his body in order to avoid being disqualified (V. 27), the interpreter may need to explain that the body is not the enemy of the spiritual life; rather, it is the *instrument* of that life. The athletic metaphor continues to govern the sense of verse 27: the 'punishment' of the body refers to grueling training for the contest, seeking to bring the body to peak efficiency. To 'enslave' the body means, in this context, to devote it unreservedly to God's service through service to others (cf. 9:19), not to practice self-denial for its own sake." (Hays, *First Corinthians*, 156.)

[74] Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 138.

[75] "Some interpreters argue that the disqualification (*adokimos*) meant that Paul would lose his reward in ministry, while his salvation would still be secure. Such a reading is understandable, but it strays from the context since Paul warns his readers about matters relating to salvation in 10:1–22. Furthermore, the Greek word here (*adokimos*) is regularly used by Paul to denote those who are disqualified in some way from genuine faith. Unbelievers have a 'depraved [*adokimon*] mind' (Rom. 1:28). Jesus Christ truly resides in the Corinthians, unless they 'fail the test' (*adokimoi*) — unless they are unbelievers (2 Cor. 13:5). Paul hopes the Corinthians will recognize his genuine faith (2 Cor. 13:6), 'that we have not failed the test' (*ouk esmen adokimoi*). He wants the

salvation does not automatically bring salvation to the messenger."[76] Indeed, ministers are the "special targets" of our Enemy, as he seeks to discredit the gospel and to thwart the gospel's progress in the world.[77]

Paul is not saying that it is possible for someone who *possesses* salvation to then *lose* it. Rather, some who profess faith—and even some who preach the necessity of faith to others—do not truly and savingly believe the gospel themselves. Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit to bring a sinner to saving faith, their remaining sin will only harden their hearts in response to the ministry of the word, even as that same ministry softens the hearts and builds up the faith of others around them.[78] Let each of us, then, examine ourselves to know whether we are truly in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). This means taking stock of what we believe intellectually, but also by examining what our actions reflect about what we truly believe, deep down in our hearts.

Discussion Questions

1) Why should we seek to gain theological knowledge (1 Cor. 8)? What problems may arise from having theological knowledge? In what way does love transform how we acquire and apply our theological knowledge to our lives? How do you seek to grow in your theological knowledge? How have you used or abused that theological knowledge?

2) What rights and liberties do you have in Christ (1 Cor. 9:1–14; cf. WCF 20)? Why is it important to recognize your own rights and liberties? Why is it important to recognize the rights and liberties of others? Where have you exercised your rights in a way that has hindered the progress of the gospel? Do you think you need to relinquish certain rights?

3) What reward does Paul expect to gain from preaching the gospel willingly (1 Cor. 9:15–18)? Why does he value that reward more than the exercise of his own rights? In what ways does Paul

---

Corinthians to progress in faith even if they think Paul has 'failed' (*adokimoi*, 2 Cor. 13:7). It would be better for the Corinthians to pass the test, even if they think Paul fails it! Jannes and Jambres are 'worthless in regard to the faith' (*adokimoi peri tēn pistin*, 2 Tim. 3:8, CSB), which clearly means they are unbelievers. The false teachers in Titus claim to know God but deny him by how they live, and are 'unfit [*adokimoi*] for any good work' (Titus 1:16, CSB). Running the race to win and competing with intensity are necessary to gain eternal life; thus Paul reminds the Corinthians that he has the same requirement as they have before he begins to warn them in chapter 10." (Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 196.)

[76] Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 443.

[77] Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 162.

[78] "As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous Judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden, from them he not only withholdeth his grace whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasions of sin; and, withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan, whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others." (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 5.6)

seek to use his freedom to serve others (1 Cor. 9:19–23)? Do you have the same priorities about the gospel? Where might you relinquish your rights to serve others?

4) Why do Christians need to exercise self-control (1 Cor. 9:24–27)? Why do Christians believe that self-control extends beyond mere behavior, all the way down to our desires? In what areas do you struggle with self-control? What does God promise about growth in self-control? Why is the imperishable prize of Christ worth pursuing self-control?