

## **Be Self-Sacrificing for the Sake of the Gospel!**

**1 Cor. 9:7-12,19-23**

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**St. Paul's Lutheran, North Freedom**

*Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?*

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

*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:7-12,19-23, NIV84)*

Dear friends, fellow believers in Jesus Christ our Savior:

In America, we treasure our rights and freedoms. The Bill of Rights guarantees to us the freedoms of speech, assembly and religion; the right to bear arms and the right to a speedy trial and the right to an attorney. We are thankful that slavery has been abolished, and that we have freedom from tyranny and oppression, and we can stand up for our rights as American citizens.

So it might startle us in our text to hear Paul talk about *not* using his rights. Though he was free, he talked about making himself a slave. Let's find out what he means, and learn to be like Paul:

### **Be Self-Sacrificing for the Sake of the Gospel!**

As Paul was writing to Christians in Corinth, he reminded them of his rights as an apostle. In this chapter he wrote, "Don't we have the right to food and drink? Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas (Peter)?" In our text he pointed out that apostles, those chosen by Christ to proclaim his gospel, had the right to receive compensation for their work. Just as "the plowman plows and the thresher threshes...in the hope of sharing in the harvest," Paul said, "we [who] have sown spiritual seed among you" should "reap a material harvest from you". The "Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14).

"But," Paul pointed out, "we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ." When Paul started the mission field in Corinth, as he did in other cities, he supported himself through his occupation as a tent-maker. Paul didn't insist on his rights of getting paid for preaching. He knew that this could be a hindrance to a congregation just starting out. The Corinthians needed Christ, the gospel, before organizing and getting their financial footing to start paying for preachers.

Our synod has a similar approach when it comes to missions. Missionaries who are called to brand new mission fields won't get paid by the new mission. We don't ask them to work at

McDonalds or Kwik Trip to earn a living either. The synod pays the missionaries, until the congregation gets enough of a footing to be able to pay their called worker.

When it comes to reaching out to others in our area, let's not think so much about our rights, but more about other peoples' needs. What the people need is the gospel of Christ. And yes, we have rights in our congregation to have our say and express our opinions—but may we be willing to forgo our rights so that we don't hinder the gospel.

And what is that gospel? Paul had been presenting it all along in this letter. Near the beginning, he wrote, "We preach Christ crucified...I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23, 2:2). Toward the end of the letter, Paul reminded them "of the gospel I preached to you...By this gospel you are saved...For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:1-3). That's the gospel, the good news we cling to, and the good news we want to share.

By Christ's work we are no longer slaves to sin, but we are set free. "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed," Jesus promises (John 8:36). We are set free from the curse of the law, from its punishment of eternal death and hell, because Jesus endured our death and hell. We are also set free from the Old Testament laws that our Lord Jesus fulfilled. No longer are we under the law that says we must be circumcised, that we must observe the Sabbath on Saturday, that we must make blood sacrifices for sins—Jesus has taken care of all of that, for us! We are free!

Paul was free. But Paul wrote, "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible." Paul gave examples of how he "enslaved" himself to win souls for Christ. "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews." He explained further: "To those under the law I became like one under the law, though I myself am not under the law." As a Christian, Paul knew he was no longer under the Old Testament Law. But to reach out to the Jews, he didn't flaunt his freedom. He made sure that Timothy, a half-Jew, got circumcised before becoming his missionary-in-training. Paul observed the Sabbath, the various Jewish ceremonies, when he did outreach among the Jews. By respecting their customs, he prayed to gain their respect and a hearing.

The same was true for the Gentiles, "to those not having the law", the Old Testament. When Paul reached out to the Gentiles, he didn't want to give the impression that they had to get circumcised or worship on Saturday to gain Christ. So Paul "became like one not having the law," like a Gentile, while retaining Christ's law: "Love one another as I have loved you." Paul wouldn't dare use his Christian freedom to do his own thing, but always to serve, to be like a slave, to win the lost.

"To the weak I became weak, to win the weak." Paul had explained this in the previous chapter, that some Christians in Corinth had weak consciences and could easily be offended if they saw Paul eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, for example. A modern-day example might be the Christian who struggles with alcohol and gets easily addicted. If they see us swigging drinks in their presence they might think, "Well, if it's all right for them, it's all right for me," and get caught in their sin again. Let's not use our freedom to lead a person into the slavery of sin.

As Paul concludes, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel." We are free, yet we are at the same time slaves of Christ and slaves to one another. We will not compromise the truth ever, but we will meet people where they're at, and by all possible means get that gospel to them with the prayer that we—more accurately, Christ—will save some. We want to share in those blessings of the gospel with them. We want them in heaven with us. So let's be self-sacrificing for the sake of spreading the gospel! Amen.