

## The Gospel Above All

### 1 Corinthians 9:1-18

Introduction: J.D. Greear is pastor of Summit Church in Raleigh, N.C. He is a former president of the SBC. He is also a very dear friend. In an interview with *Outreach Magazine* (10-2-2019) J.D. addresses the importance and centrality of the gospel for Christianity, what he calls “the gospel above all.” There he says: “The apostle Paul said the gospel was of first importance (1 Cor. 15:3-4). This implies that other things were important to him, too. But, they weren’t of *first* importance. Only the gospel was.

Evangelical Christians have always been gospel people of course. After all, it’s in our name. *Evangelical* is a transliteration of the Greek word “gospel.” So, in that sense, the gospel has always been our “brand.” It’s been the heart of Christianity from the beginning. It’s what gives our faith life.”

The gospel indeed gives our faith life. In fact, the gospel impacts all areas of life. And, some of those areas might surprise us. One such area concerns the question, “should ministers of the gospel always receive financial support for their work of ministry?” The important word in that question is the word “always.” Most of us would recognize that the Bible teaches that ministers are worthy of financial support. One text that immediately comes to mind is 1 Tim. 5:17-18

where the Bible says, “The elders who are good leaders are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says: *Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain* [Deut. 25:4], and, “The worker is worthy of his wages” [Luke 10:7].” Paul wrote those words, but he also wrote 1 Cor. 9:1-18 where he will affirm that for the sake of the gospel and the souls of men, he gladly laid aside “this right” and preached for free. The salvation of others mattered above all other issues. The gospel above all was the decisive factor in all his decision-making. Setting to the side personal rights and preferences mattered nothing at all to him if it meant he might be used by Christ to save just one more.

I. There is a right to compensation for the minister of the gospel 9:1-14

First Corinthians 8:13 ties chapters 8 and 9 together. Paul will not do anything to cause a brother or sister to stumble in their faith, even if he has the liberty and right to do it. That includes eating food sacrificed to a lifeless idol (ch. 8). And, it includes receiving compensation for preaching the gospel (ch. 9). In a sense chapter 9 is a personal example that drives home the point Paul is trying to make in chapter 8. Now to do that, he builds a compelling (dare we say irrefutable?) argument for the right of anyone who preaches the gospel and ministers to the church to be financially compensated. His argument is filled

with rhetorical questions (15 all together) and illustrations. It is a persuasive masterpiece.

1) It is the right of God's apostles 9:1-6

Paul begins his rhetorical barrage in verse one with 4 rapid fire questions all demanding a yes answer.

1) "Am I not free?" Yes! I am free in Christ (Gal. 5:1) as much as anyone.

2) "Am I not an apostle?" Yes, called by Christ on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-19; also Gal. 1:11-24).

3) "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" Yes!

4) "Are you not my work in the Lord?" Yes! I planted the church in Corinth (Acts 18:17; 1 Cor. 3:6).

Verse 2 reinforces this last point, "If I am not an apostle to others [of course I am to them too], at least I am to you, because you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord." You authenticate and prove and validate my work and ministry in the Lord.

Paul continues his "defense" and the rights of his apostleship "to those who might want to "examine" his credentials in verses 3ff. He again makes use of rhetorical questions, but he is also very personal. He asks, "Don't we have the right to eat and drink" (v. 4)? Don't we have the right for financial support to meet the basic necessities of life like food and water? He asks

further in verse 5, “Don’t we have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife like the other apostles, the Lord’s brothers, and Cephas?” Paul was single. Most, if not all the apostles like Cephas (Peter) were married. The same apparently was true for Jesus’s brothers (James, Joseph, Simon and Judas; Matt. 13:55). When they traveled and preached the gospel the churches cared for the apostles and their wives, and no doubt their entire families. Wasn’t Paul entitled to the same rights and support? Paul adds Barnabas to the argument in verse 6. Schreiner notes this “suggest that Barnabas was also unmarried and did not always receive financial support” (*1 Cor.*, TNTC, 183). Paul’s point is clear. If all the other apostles, including Peter, and the Lord’s brothers are cared for financially, he and Barnabas would have that right as well. It would not be unusual. It would be expected. Yet, as we will see, for the sake of the gospel, Paul will gladly forfeit this right (v. 12). The gospel above all comes first!

2) It is the right of a soldier 9:7

Paul will now add, in rapid-fire succession, 9 additional arguments and illustrations to demonstrate his right to financial support. He starts with a military illustration. “Who serves as a soldier at his own expense” (v. 7)? None. Warriors are compensated for their service.

3) It is the right of a vinedresser 9:7

“Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its fruit?” (cf. Deut. 20:6)? No one. The very purpose of planting a garden is to enjoy what it produces.

4) It is the right of a shepherd 9:7

“Or who shepherds (*ESV*, “tends”) a flock and does not drink the milk from the flock?” Again, the answer is no one. Your labor among the flock is to be rewarded.

5) It is the right of the ox 9:8-9

This may be Paul’s most unusual illustration in this section. He again begins with rhetorical questions, “Am I saying this from a human perspective” (v. 8)? The *ESV* says “on human authority?” The idea may be is this just one man’s human opinion? Paul immediately counters with an appeal to Scripture, “Doesn’t the law also say the same thing?” What follows is his unexpected appeal to Deut. 25:4 and the rights of an ox! “For it is written in the law of Moses, do not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain” (v. 9). He then asks rhetorically, “Is God really concerned about oxen?” While much debated, this is what I believe Paul is doing. First, he is not saying God does not care about animals like an ox (see Prov. 12:10). He cares for all of His good creation. He is, however, more concerned with humans who bear His image (Gen 1:26-31). Second, he is not denying the literal meaning of the Deuteronomy text that an ox should be allowed to eat as it works.

Third, I believe Paul recognized and considered the greater context of Deut. 25:4 in his appeal to this passage. By the way, that is something good interpreters of the Bible will always do. Gardner is helpful at this point, “Paul’s use of the Old Testament often provokes questions of this sort, and it is always good to start by looking at the original context in the Old Testament of the verse quoted since frequently this can help explain why he chose the passage. The context for Deuteronomy 25:4 has to do with the way in which men and women are treated. It especially has to do with the care of certain people. To go back no further than 24:14, the passage first speaks to the need to pay workers what they are due.” (*1 Cor. ZECNT*, 395).

Fourth, Paul is making a lesser (ox) to greater argument (humans) and applying the principle contained within the command. Those who work, whoever they are, should reap from their labors. If this is true for an ox, it is certainly true for an apostle!

6) It is the right of the plowman

9:10

Paul raises another rhetorical question in verse 10. “Isn’t he [God] really saying it for our sake?” This time he provides his own answer. “Yes, this is written for our sakes,” for our benefit and profit. He then adds another illustration, “he who plows ought to plow in hope.” The man plows a field

with the hope and expectation it will provide food in due season for him and his family. It is why he puts in the hard labor.

7) It is the right of a thresher 9:10

“He who threshes should thresh in hope of sharing the crop” (v. 10). The reaper in the field works with the anticipation their will be grain to take home at the end of the day. My mind immediately recalls the book of Ruth.

8) It is the right of God’s servants 9:11-12

Paul now makes a precise spiritual application to the Corinthians from his numerous illustrations. “If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it too much if we reap material benefits from you? (v. 11)? Of course, the answer here is no (cf. Rom. 15:27). Furthermore he adds, “If others have this right to receive benefits from you, don’t we even more? (v. 12)? If those who have come lately receive financial support from you, should not the one who founded the work? Of course, the answer is yes. But Paul then drives home the key point of these verses. “Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right.” We have not required or received any financial help from anyone. “Instead, we endure everything so that we will not hinder (*ESV*, “put an obstacle”) the gospel of Christ.” This is the first of 7 uses of the word “gospel” in verses 12-18. Its priority is the crux and heart of Paul’s

argument. The gospel above all was not a mere slogan for Paul. It was the very heart and guiding light of his ministry.

9) It is the right of priests 9:13

Once more Paul uses a familiar phrase, “Don’t you know?” Do you not know “that those who perform temple services eat the food from the temple and those who serve at the altar share in the offerings of the altar” (v. 13)?

Gordon Fee notes there is ample support for this example (Lev. 6:16-18, 26-28; 7:6, 8-10, 28-36; Num. 18:8-19; *1 Cor.*, 4:55). Men engaged in spiritual service for God have always been taken care of for their work.

10) It is the right of those who minister the word 9:14

This is Paul’s climatic argument. He cites as his support Jesus himself. “In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should earn their living by the gospel” (v. 14). Paul probably has in mind the words of our Lord recorded in Luke 10:7, “For the worker is worthy of his wages.” Jesus commanded that God’s people should take good care of God’s servants. However, he did not command his servants to take what was offered. Ultimately God’s servants serve Him above all. They serve the gospel above all. Whatever best furthers the gospel must guide the minister of the gospel above all other considerations.

II. There is a compulsion to preach the message of the gospel 9:15-18



Today it is popular to refer to many things as a gospel issue. However, such statements often fail to make a much needed theological distinction between “the gospel” and “implications” that derive from and are related to the gospel. Issues like abortion, gender, poverty, and racism are critically important and the Bible speaks to them all. Further, and importantly, the gospel will impact our thinking on how we understand and respond to these issues. But, and this is crucial, our response to these issues will be implications that are derived from the gospel. They are not the gospel. The gospel, as Paul makes clear in 1 Cor. 15:3-6 is this: Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures and all who repent and believe in him will be saved. That is the gospel. But, as we just affirmed, there are implications and perspectives and actions that the gospel will require and even mandate. Some will relate to how we preach the gospel. In verses 15-18 Paul highlights 2.

1) We proclaim the gospel out of necessity 9:15-16

Paul again affirms his position that he will receive no financial remuneration for preaching the gospel at Corinth. “For my part I have used none of these rights, nor have I written these things that they may be applied to my case” (*ESV*, “to secure any provisions”). I have the right to financial support but I will not ask for it. My argument here is to set the record straight. Paul then makes a highly emotional declaration worthy of every minister of the gospel,

“For it would be better for me to die than for anyone to deprive me of my boast! For if I preach the gospel, I have no reason to boast, because I am compelled (ESV, “necessity is laid upon me”) to preach – and woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (vv. 15-16). Paul would separate himself from those whose motivation for preaching is money. He sees faithful gospel proclamation as a life-or-death issue for himself. So great is this burden he tells us he must preach the gospel. There is no choice. Indeed, he virtually lays a curse upon himself, “woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”

Jeremiah felt this in Jere 20:9. The great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon rightly said any truly gospel-called minister knows exactly what Paul is talking about. He writes: “If a man be truly called of God to ministry, I will defy him to withhold himself from it. A man who has really within him the inspiration of the Holy Ghost calling him to preach cannot help it. He must preach. As fire within the bones, so will that influence be until it blazes forth. Friends may check him, foes criticize him, despisers sneer at him, the man is indomitable. He must preach if he has the call of heaven.” (“Preach the Gospel”, 8-5-1855).

Faithful gospel preachers preach the gospel of Jesus Christ whether they are paid or not. They must. They are under a divine mandate and spiritual obligation and calling. Paul’s only boast is he will not put any hinderance in

the way of preaching the gospel. Preaching the gospel itself is no ground for boasting. It is a divinely given compulsion. He must do it. He has no choice, no say in the matter.

Paul's point in verse 17 is open to some confusion and potential misunderstanding. There Paul writes, "For if I do this willingly, I have a reward, but if unwillingly, I am entrusted with a commission (*ESV*, "stewardship"). Now, what exactly is Paul saying? I find the insights of Charles Hodge extremely helpful at this point: "That Paul preached the gospel willingly, that he esteemed it his highest joy and glory, is abundantly evident from his history and his writings. Rom. 1, 5. 11, 13. 15, 15.16. 1 Cor. 15, 9. 10. Gal. 1, 15.16. Eph. 3, 8. The difference, therefore here expressed between (*ἐκῶν* and *ἄκων*), willingly and unwillingly, is not the difference between cheerfully and reluctantly, but between optional and obligatory. He says he had a dispensation or stewardship (*οἰκονομία*) committed to him. These stewards (*οἰκονόμοι*) were commonly slaves. There is a great difference between what a slave does in obedience to a command, and what a man volunteers to do of his own accord. And this is the precise difference to which the apostle here refers." (*An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Thornapple Commentaries, 161-63). *The Message*, I think, captures well the intent of Paul's point, "If this was my

own idea of just another way to make a living, I'd expect some pay. But since it's not my idea but something solemnly entrusted to me, why would I expect to get paid?"

2) We proclaim the gospel freely 9:18

Paul concludes this section with one final rhetorical question that informs us he does indeed have a reward, just not a monetary one. He asks, "What then is my reward?" Answer: "To preach the gospel and offer it free of charge and not make full use of my rights in the gospel." To preach the gospel free of charge is both his boast (v.15) and his reward (vv 17-18). *The Message* again is helpful and provides a colorful paraphrase: "So am I getting anything out of it? Yes, as a matter of fact: the pleasure of proclaiming the Message at no cost to you. You don't even have to pay my expenses!" At Corinth, for the sake of the gospel, Paul felt it was best to serve and preach with no financial compensation. It was a decision he freely made for the spiritual benefit of others and one he was glad to make. The Corinthians, therefore, would be well served to follow his example on eating food sacrificed to idols (chs. 8-10). Not causing a brother or sister to stumble will always trump my rights. Love demands it. The gospel above all demands it too!

Conclusion: Several years ago, I heard a famous athlete say he loved playing his sport so much that if he could he would play for free. The apostle Paul told a first century church that he loved the gospel and human souls so much that if he could he would preach for free. And, he did! If there is ever to be a stumbling block that keeps a lost person from believing in the gospel of Jesus Christ, let it be the gospel and nothing else. Let us gladly surrender any and every right necessary so that the lost may hear unhindered the good news of the death, burial and resurrection of the Son of God for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life. Jesus surrendered his rights and privileges to go to the cross. It is a small thing for us, like Paul, to follow in his footsteps.