

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 11, 2007**

RIGHTS AND WRONGS

1 Corinthians 9:1-18

We Americans are passionate about our rights. Our national creed, The Declaration of Independence, says:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

That we have not always lived up to our creed is also self-evident, particularly in the treatment of black Americans throughout our history and in the plague of abortion which has taken the lives of some 45 million unborn children in our land since the Supreme Court declared it a constitutional right in 1973.

But even if we are not always consistent, we cherish our rights and will sometimes go to great extremes to defend our rights, especially those rights written into the U.S. Constitution. When the Constitution was written in 1787, a Bill of Rights was added, spelling out the rights of the people that are protected under the Constitution. These rights include freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, the right to keep and bear arms, freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, the right of due process, and several others. Try to deny us our rights, try to take away our rights, and we will fight you tooth and nail.

Of course, there are always people pushing the envelope to demand new rights, such as the right of homosexual marriage or the right of assisted suicide. Organizations like PETA – People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals – claim that animals have rights, too. It often seems that groups like PETA value animals more highly than they value people. Some legal scholars have even advanced the idea that whales and other animals should have legal rights in American courts.

Americans, of course, are not the first or the only people to be passionate about our rights. As we saw last week, there were some in Corinth – call them ‘the freedom party’ – who felt strongly that they had a right to eat meat that had been offered to idols. But Paul said it is wrong to insist on your rights as a Christian at the expense of the well-being of other believers. It is wrong to demand your rights when to do so will bring harm to your brother or sister for whom Christ died. Remember what Chesterton said: “To have a right to do a thing is not at all the same as to be right in doing it.” Just because you have a right to do something doesn’t mean it is always right to exercise your rights. Did you get that?

Last Sunday, in looking at 1 Corinthians 8, we highlighted these two biblical principles: First, love is more important than knowledge. And second, we must not allow the exercise of our freedom in Christ to become a spiritual stumbling block or hindrance to others. In the exercise of our freedom – our rights as the redeemed people of God – we are to serve one another in love.

Here in chapter 9 Paul uses his own life and ministry as an illustration of the freedom we have in Christ not to demand our rights. What we see here is that Paul is so free in Christ that he is free to relinquish his rights for the sake of the gospel.

Notice the progression or flow of this passage. In verses 1-2, Paul defends his position as an apostle. Then, in verses 3-14, he states and defends his rights as an apostle. Finally, in verses 15-18, he demonstrates his freedom in Christ not to demand his rights. Let's look at these in some detail.

1. PAUL DEFENDS HIS POSITION

First, Paul defends his position and authority as an apostle. Some of the Corinthians were challenging Paul's authority and questioning his claim to be an apostle, in part because Paul did not insist on the same rights and privileges as other apostles and church leaders. But Paul did not back down from his claim to be an apostle.

He begins in verse 1 with four rhetorical questions, all of which anticipate an affirmative answer:

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?

The New Testament apostles were authoritative witnesses to the gospel and to the resurrection of Christ. The word "apostle" literally means "one who is sent out." Paul was not one of the original apostles, and so some may have questioned his right to claim the title. But Paul had seen and met the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, and he became a witness to the resurrection. Not only that, Paul said, but the existence of the Corinthian church and their fellowship with the Lord should be enough to satisfy them of the authenticity of his apostleship, for they were the living proof of his authority.

2. PAUL DEFENDS HIS RIGHTS

Next, beginning in verse 3, Paul proceeds to defend his rights as an apostle – which, by extension, applies to people today who are engaged in full-time Christian ministry, such as missionaries, evangelists, and pastors.

In verses 4-6, through another series of questions, Paul states the specific rights that are his and those of anyone called to full-time Christian ministry. Listen to what he says:

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 Peter? Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?

Here is what Paul is saying. We have a right to be given our food and drink by the church (or churches) we serve. We have a right to have everything we need materially supplied to us. (Everything we need, Paul says, not everything we want. Paul is not saying that he or any of the apostles or anyone in ministry is entitled to a life of luxury.)

In addition to food and drink, Paul says, we have a right to be married and to be accompanied by that wife in our ministry travels, just like Peter and some of the other apostles, and even the brothers of the Lord Himself. Paul claimed the same rights as an apostle as they had.

Third, in verse 6, Paul claims the right to be compensated for his ministry. He says: "We have a right not to work for our living."

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. You are thinking that pastors and others in "full-time Christian ministry" don't work for a living as it is. Pastors only work one day a week, right? You know how it is: Six days invisible and one day incomprehensible! Some people have no clue what pastors do from Monday to Saturday.

When Paul claims the right not to work for a living, he doesn't mean there is no work involved in the ministry. He is talking about not having to get a secular job in order to earn a living. Paul himself was a tentmaker. He supported himself and his ministry by his work as a tentmaker. But he argues that those who are called to full-time ministry should be compensated for their ministry so they don't need any outside employment. Instead, they can devote themselves full-time to the ministry to which God has called them.

So Paul makes it clear that an apostle – or anyone in full-time ministry – has the right of church support. But Paul himself, as we will see in verses 12 and 15, did not exercise this right in his relationship with the Corinthians.

Paul goes on, beginning in verse 7, to give five reasons why those engaged in ministry should be supported by the church.

The first comes from common experience. Verse 7 presents three biblical metaphors for ministry – the soldier, the farmer, and the shepherd. A soldier does not serve his country at his own expense. And both the shepherd and farmer are able to benefit from their labors.

The second reason is rooted in biblical principle. Paul points to the provision in the Old Testament Law, in Deuteronomy 25:4, which says: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." In ancient Israel oxen were used in threshing wheat. The ox would trample the wheat, shaking the grain loose from the husks. The Law provided that

the ox was not to be muzzled while it was treading the grain. Why? So it could be free to eat some of the grain while threshing.

Paul doesn't mean to suggest that God doesn't care about oxen. What he means is that if God cares this much about oxen and their well-being (here is a biblical example of animal rights!), then how much more does this principle apply to human beings. The principle, simply put, is that the worker should share in the fruit of his work. It applies both to oxen and to apostles.

The third reason is rooted in simple fairness or justice. This is what Paul indicates in verses 11 and 12:

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?

It is only logical and fair, Paul is saying, that when you have been blessed and helped by someone, you do something to express your gratitude and appreciation. To the Corinthians in particular Paul says: If you have benefited spiritually by our ministry among you, is it wrong for us to receive some material benefits from you in return? Of course not! We have a right to your support, Paul says, but we have not made use of this right. We have not demanded our rights, but have set them aside for the sake of a greater good. For the sake of the gospel.

The fourth reason Paul gives why those engaged in ministry should be supported by the church is the example of the priests and Levites who served in the Jewish temple. They got their food from the offerings made by the people in the temple.

The fifth and final reason Paul offers in defense of his right of compensation for his ministry – and this is the caper – is found in the words of Jesus Himself. In verse 14 Paul says: “The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.”

That is not a verbatim quote from Jesus. What Jesus said, when He sent out the twelve disciples in Matthew 10, was: “The worker is worth his keep” (10:10). And in Luke 10, when He sent out 72 short-term missionaries, He said: “The worker deserves his wages.”

So Paul cites the authority of the Lord Jesus Himself that those who do the Lord's work should be supported in that work by the Lord's people.

It is a principle that is still valid today. I don't mind telling you that I am grateful to be part of a church that values the ministry of pastors and supports our ministry with your financial giving and your prayers, with your encouragement and with your partnership in ministry, using the gifts and abilities and opportunities the Lord places before you. I'm certain that Pastor Bob, Pastor David, and Justin join me in thanking you for your generosity and faithfulness in giving to support the ministry of this church that frees us to

do the ministry tasks God has called us to do. We are blessed by your faithful support. And we are grateful for it.

3. PAUL DEMONSTRATES HIS FREEDOM

Paul says that as an apostle he has a right to insist on his rights. But here is the third point I want you to see in this passage. After defending his position as an apostle (verses 1-2) and his rights as an apostle (verses 3-14), Paul now demonstrates his freedom in Christ not to demand his rights. He demonstrates his freedom not to exercise his rights.

Though he had a right to be treated in the same way as the other apostles, Paul says in verse 15: “I have not used any of these rights.” The one right Paul insisted on was the right to give up his rights! He says: “I would rather die than have you or anyone take this away from me” (9:15c).

Back in verse 12, he says that he relinquished his rights for the sake of the gospel. Instead of demanding his rights, he was willing to “put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.”

Paul had learned a life-transforming truth. It was a truth that transformed his life. And it is a truth that will transform our lives as it takes root in our souls and gets a grip on our hearts. It is really a two-part truth. What Paul learned was:

- 1) It’s not about him. It’s about Christ. Paul was not the center of the universe. Neither are you. Neither am I. It’s not about us. It’s all about Him. He is before all things and He holds all things together (Colossians 1:17). From Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever (Romans 11:36).
- 2) It’s not about rights. There may be times when we need to claim our rights and defend them as members of Christ’s church. But the general rule is: It’s not about rights. It’s about ministry. It’s about serving the Lord. It’s about removing obstacles and hindrances that keep people from coming to Christ or growing in Christ.

That’s the truth that transformed Paul’s life. And it can transform ours.

In a culture where demanding your rights is the norm, it is a counterintuitive and countercultural thing to voluntarily give up your rights for the sake of the well-being of another. But that, says Paul, is what we are called to if we are to experience authentic Christian community where brothers and sisters in Christ exercise their freedom by serving one another in love. And the supreme example of giving up one’s rights and privileges is Jesus Himself. The Bible says in Philippians 2 that while He had equal status with God the Father He didn’t think so much of Himself that He had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. But in God’s perfect time He set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a servant by becoming human. And in His

humanity He didn't claim special privileges. (Adapted from Philippians 2:5-8, The Message).

Being found in appearance as a man,
He humbled Himself and became obedient to death –
even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8).

When He left his Father's throne in heaven and came to earth in the incarnation, He willingly set aside His divine rights. The only right He didn't give up was the right to give up His rights. For us. For our well-being. For our salvation. So we could meet here today and say, from the depths of our hearts, "It is well with my soul."

Thank God Jesus did not demand His rights, but willingly set them aside for us.

Sometimes, in the Christian life, it is wrong to insist on our rights. May we be willing at all times to surrender our rights for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of our brothers and sisters for whom Christ died.

Lord, let it be so in us, for the glory of Your name. Amen.