

Giving up your rights for the good of others

Give up your rights for the benefit of others

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 12th December 2004

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? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. This is my defence to those who sit in judgment on me. 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? Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? 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. Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me.

What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it. (1 Corinthians 9: 1-18)

Introduction

We are told today that we all have rights, and that we should stand up for our rights and claim them. This passage tells us that there are times when we need to do the exact opposite: to lay down our rights for the good of others, especially so that the Gospel may go forward. Paul speaks about the rights that he had as an apostle and as a minister of the Gospel to be supported by those to whom he preached, but how he laid down those rights because he knew that if he exercised those rights it would hinder the spread of the Gospel. The lesson for us is clear: if Paul is prepared to make such a big and costly sacrifice, of rights to which he has full entitlement, how much more should we be prepared to give up our rights for the benefit of others.

There is a very strong link between this passage and chapter 8 of 1 Corinthians. In chapter 8 the apostle deals with the issue of eating meat which had previously been offered to idols. Some believers felt free to eat such meat, while others had a bad conscience about doing so. Paul says to those who do eat such meat that, according to Scripture, they have a strong case, and they have a "right" to eat meat that has been previously offered to idols. Idols are of no consequence, as they are lifeless lumps of wood and stone. However, they should think about the effect that their eating might have on others. If it might bring distress to others, and encourage them to go against their consciences, they need to not eat such meat, but voluntarily abstain from doing so.

We can divide this passage into three main headings:

Paul's rights as an apostle, vv. 1 – 6

Paul's rights as a minister of the Gospel, vv. 7 – 14

Paul's sacrifice of those rights for the sake of others, vv. 15 – 18

1. Paul's rights as an apostle

From quite early on after Paul's time in Corinth, Paul's position as an apostle was questioned by others who themselves made claim to be apostles. So Paul was

forced to defend his position, not because he wanted status, but because he knew that if the church listened to these false apostles, it would be led astray.

So he asks a series of questions here, to which the obvious answer is "yes". "Am I not free", he says, free, in other words, to receive support from others? Answer: yes. "Am I not an apostle?" he says. Answer: "yes". "Have I not seen the Lord?", and so he effectively says, do I not fulfil the qualification that is necessary to be an apostle? Answer: "yes". "Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?" In other words, he says, is not the fact that you have been converted, and that there is a church in Corinth at all, proof that I am an apostle? The answer again is "yes". And here he does answer his own question explicitly: "Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord."

Paul says that these qualifications are his "defence for those who sit in judgement" on him. There were those who were judging him, perhaps because he was so poor, and because he suffered so much, and saying "If Paul really was God's anointed apostle, there would be more obvious signs of that anointing through his prosperity." But Paul says that his life proves his calling as an apostle.

He then goes on to ask further question of the Corinthians. "Don't we have the right to food and drink?" by which he means in this context the right to food and drink provided by the churches to which he goes. The answer must be, if he is an apostle, of course he does. And then again "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", by whom he means Simon Peter. The other apostles were married, and took their wives with them on their apostolic journeys, and expected the churches to provide for their wives as well as themselves. Paul says do I not have the right to this as well? Of course he does. Then he asks "Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?" Is there one rule for some apostles, and another rule for Paul and those with him. Of course there should not be. He has as much of a right to support as all of the other apostles.

2. Paul's rights as a minister of the Gospel

Paul then goes on to speak about his right, not just as an apostle, but also as a minister of the Gospel, to be supported by the church. He makes an overwhelming case, from both natural justice and Scripture, for the principle

that ministers of the Gospel should as a rule be supported by those to whom they minister. He gives six reasons why the church should support those who preach the Gospel to them:

1) It is in line with the practice in the world

Paul says in verse 7, "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?" Every organisation in the world rewards its workers. Whoever heard of a soldier paying his own expenses to go to war? It would be absurd for a farmer to plant a vineyard and not to be able to eat of the grapes that were grown in his own vineyard. By the same principle, it is only right that those who preach the Gospel should benefit materially from those who have been blessed by hearing that Gospel.

2) The Old Testament law commands it

Paul then goes on to say in verses 8 to 10a, "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?" In the Old Testament times, as still happens today, wheat would be separated from the straw by placing it in a treadmill. An ox would be made to go round and round on this treadmill, and as it trod on the stalks, the grains of wheat would be separated from the straw. God said in the Old Testament Law that the Israelites should not stop the ox from eating the grain that it was treading out. It would be cruel to the animal, and besides, they would get less work out of the animal if they did so. Paul says that there is an enduring principle in this law. God was not just concerned about animals, but also about ministers of the Gospel, who are in a spiritual way treading out the grain. They should not be "muzzled" and deprived of food as they do this work.

3) Natural justice demands it

Paul adds a third reason in verses 10b to 11, that of natural justice. He says, "Yes, this was written for us, because when the ploughman ploughs 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?" Those who labour in spiritual work are spiritual "ploughmen"

and "threshers". Just as a ploughman working in a physical field should do his work in the hope of sharing in the harvest, so should a Christian worker working in a spiritual field. If spiritual seed has been sown by such a worker, it is only right that he should receive a material "pay back."

4) The church should be consistent

Paul says in verse 12, "If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?" The church in Corinth was being inconsistent. It supported other workers, who had less of a claim on them than Paul did. If others were supported by the church, surely it should support Paul? In some churches it is accepted that missionaries should be supported by the church, but the idea of those who teach the congregation at home being supported is frowned upon. We should not be inconsistent. If one person who labours at preaching the Gospel is worthy of support, so is another.

5) The Old Testament practice commends it

In verse 13 Paul reminds his readers of the Old Testament law about sacrifices and how the priests and their families were allowed to eat a portion of what was offered on the altar. He says, "Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar?" If priests under the Old Testament were provided for materially through their service of God, how much more should those who teach under the New Covenant.

6) The teaching of Christ commands it

Paul's clinching argument is that this is what Jesus himself commanded. He says in verse 14, "In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel." This is no doubt a reference to Matthew 10.10, which is part of the instructions for when Jesus sent out his disciples on a mission to Israel. He commanded them not to take a purse, but to expect that those to whom they were sent would provide for them, giving the reason that "the worker is worth his keep."

What is the lesson for us here? As believers we have a responsibility to provide support for those who teach us the Word of God. Paul says in this passage that he gave up his right to be supported by those he taught. This did not lessen the

responsibility laid upon those he taught to provide for him and others who taught them the Word of God. And, even if those who teach us today do not demand payment for it, it does not lessen our responsibility to provide support for them. Are you giving what you should be giving to enable this to happen? You receive your spiritual food week by week from those who teach you. Are you doing what you should be doing to see that those who teach you receive their physical food?

The Old Testament taught the principle of tithing. If this principle is followed, it only takes ten wage earners to support a full time worker at the same level of income as the average of the ten. Tithing is not directly commanded in the New Testament. But should we be giving less than a tenth of our income when, under the New Covenant, we have received many more blessings than believers knew under the Old Covenant?

3. Paul's giving up of his right to be supported financially

In verse 12 the apostle says, "But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the Gospel of Christ." In his particular situation, Paul was aware that if he demanded money from those to whom he preached, it might seem as though he was seeking to win them to Christ in order to get their money off them, so, of his own accord, he made the decision to give up his right for support from those he taught, so as not to hinder the spread of the Gospel.

Again in verse 15 the apostle says "But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this to you in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die that have anyone deprive me of this boast." He feels so strongly about this that he would prefer to die rather than to receive payment for his preaching. He speaks of this as something he "boasts" about. We see a big contrast between what the Corinthians boasted about and what the apostle boasted about. They boasted about their prosperity and strength, and the prosperity of their new leaders. All Paul had to boast about was his weakness and poverty. This theme is developed further in his second letter in chapters 11 and 12, where he "boasts" about his sufferings and weaknesses, because they show the power of Christ more fully in his life. "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2

Corinthians 12.10).

However, he goes on to say in verses 16 and 17, "when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me." He says he cannot boast about preaching the Gospel, as if that is something that he has volunteered to do. Preaching the Gospel is something he is compelled to do. He has no choice about it. This is something that every true believer will have, and especially every true minister of the Gospel: this sense of constraint, whereby they must speak of Christ. If you have witnessed to your friend about the Lord, do not feel proud of yourself. You have only done your duty. If it were something you had volunteered for, then you would be able to expect a pat on the back. But if it is something God has commanded you to do, then you have simply done your duty, and you have no right to expect a reward for it.

But in verse 18 Paul says there is a reward he does get from preaching the Gospel, and that is the reward of knowing that he has done so free of charge. "What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it." He has no choice about whether or not he preaches. He has to preach. But he does have a choice about whether he is paid for doing so, and by voluntarily choosing not to be paid, for the sake of the Gospel, he is opting to be rewarded in the life to come rather than in this life. His reward is to know that he is offering it free of charge, and so more people are, humanly speaking, likely to be saved as a result, which in turn will result in a richer welcome into glory for him.

We need to realise that this position that the apostle took was a very costly one for him. It meant that he had to work his fingers to the bone to support himself. He would work by night and preach and teach by day, with the result that he often went without sleep, and was nearly always very hard up. He says in 1 Thessalonians 2.6 and 9,

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children....Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

Why did the apostle do this? Because of his love for those who are not yet

saved. He valued the lives of those he was seeking to win so much that he was prepared to make great sacrifices in order that they may know Christ.

How are we to apply this to ourselves? We should be prepared to give up our "rights" for the sake of others, so that they may have the best opportunity of hearing and receiving the Gospel. Let us think about some rights that we need to be ready to give up.

The right to comfort and prosperity. At one level you have a right to do what you want with your hard-earned cash. But you may decide to give sacrificially to support missionaries and servants of the Gospel. Or you may give up your comfortable life and go yourself.

The right to spend your leisure time as you wish. At one level you are free to do what you want with your time off from work, and indeed, as a matter of responsibility and good stewardship you need to allow some time for rest and relaxation. But perhaps there are times when you need to give up your "right" for rest and relaxation for the sake of making Christ known.

Your "right" to sound off about your political views and prejudices. Maybe you enjoy "holding forth" on your favourite political theme. But sometimes we need to keep quiet about our political views for the sake of the Gospel. For example, maybe you are a keen Euro-sceptic, and you want Britain to pull out of the European Union. If you strongly advocate your views in the presence of someone who is a pro-Europe, he will not listen to what you say about the Gospel because he does not like your political views.

Your "right" to dress how you want. You may say, "As a Christian I am free from man-made rules about dress." To a certain extent that is true, as long as you dress modestly and in a way that does not disguise or try to change your gender. However, for the sake of others you may need to curb voluntarily your freedom, so they will not be stopped from hearing the Gospel because of the way you are dressed.

Your right to "have a go" at people who annoy you or, in your view, do wrong. Suppose you see a child damaging your property, or someone else's. You have a "right" to tell them off, and, indeed, a duty to point out that what they are doing is not right. But if you "have a go" at them, and shout or are abrasive and unpleasant, you are going to put an obstacle in the way of them hearing and believing the Gospel.

Your "right" to be in a bad mood. Maybe you feel miserable. You cannot be bothered to be cheerful or nice to people today. At one level you do have a right to your moodiness, but if you take on board what the apostle is saying in this passage, for the sake of the Gospel you will not allow your moods to affect your behaviour, especially with those who do not know Christ. If you go round with a long face scowling at everyone, people are going to think that the Gospel is bad news, and, humanly speaking, they will be put off from coming to Christ.

And what about any who read this who are not as yet believers – what is the message for you? See the value of your soul. If servants of Christ like the apostle Paul are prepared to make such great sacrifices so that people like you can be saved, can you not see how valuable your soul is? Jesus said, "What will a man gain if he gains the whole world and yet loses his soul?" Sometimes people do not come to Christ because they are worried about losing the friendship of someone in this world, or they do not want to give up certain sins. Your spiritual life is worth more than a million friends. Come to Christ, and find Him who is worth more than the whole world.

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