

Proper Use of Christian Liberty: Loving Service, not Selfish License

Limiting—and Leveraging—My Liberty for the Gospel’s Sake

1 Corinthians 9:1-23

After using himself as an example of limiting his liberty for the sake of his brother (1 Cor 8:13), Paul goes on to further explain the proper use of Christian liberty, again by using himself as an example.

I. Paul’s Defense of his **freedom** (1-2)

- A. Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions, the expected answer to all of which is “yes”
- B. This freedom in Christ is brought by salvation (cf. Ga 2:4, 4:26-5:1)

II. Paul’s Defense of his **Rights** (3-14)

- A. To eat and drink (4)
- B. To be **married** (5)
- C. To refrain from **working** for a living (6-14)
 1. Argument from secular occupations (7)
 2. Arguments from Scripture (8-14)
 - v9-10**—argument from the lesser to the greater: if God is concerned that oxen be provided for by their labors, how much more the humans he employs in His service?
 - Argument is based on Deuteronomy 24:5
 - v11**—argument from the greater to the lesser: “If a laborer may eat of a valuable crop he is working on, much more should he be allowed to eat from a less valuable crop instead?” (Ciampa & Rosner, Pillar NT Commentary: 1 Corinthians)
 - v12a**—another argument from the lesser to the greater: if others (who did not found the church) have received support from you, shouldn’t we also (who did found the church)?
 - v13-14**—argument from OT Levitical system
 - v14 is probably a quote from Lk 10:7, which is also cited in 1 Ti 5:18

III. Paul’s Limiting his **Rights** (15-18)

- A. Paul’s denial that this is “reverse psychology” (15)
 - v15 is grammatically interrupted: “I would rather die than—no one will deprive me of my grounds for boasting!” (PNTC translation)

- B. Paul’s insistence that he really has no **choice** but to preach the Gospel (16-17)

v16 is two contrasting statements, stating the same thing: “I must preach the Gospel!”

v17 is also two contrasting statements: “If I had a choice, I would have a reward; but I don’t have a choice (I’m a house-slave), so I am only doing my duty.” (cf. 4:1-2; Lk 17:7-10)

- C. Paul’s surprising assertion: “My reward, my glory, what I do have a choice about—is that I do not make full use of my rights!” (18)

IV. Limiting and Leveraging **Liberty** (19-23)

A. Paul limits his liberty (19)

- His **status**: he is free from all—under obligation to no person
- His **choice**: he made himself a slave to all people
- His **goal**: reaching more people for Christ

B. Paul leverages his liberty (20-22)

1. For those **born** Jews (20a)
 - Ex: Paul circumcising Timothy (a Jew, Acts 16:1-3); Taking a Jewish vow (Acts 21:20-26)
2. For those who are Jews by **choice** (20b)
3. For those who are **Gentiles** (not under the Law) (21)
 - Paul clarifies that he is not lawless, but under Christ’s law!
4. For the **weak** (22)
5. Paul’s summary: all **things** to all **people**

“He does not think that fundamental and distinctive demands are negotiable, depending on the circumstances... He did not tone down his assault on idolatry to avoid offending idolaters or to curry favor with them. His accommodation has nothing to do with watering down the gospel message, soft-pedaling its ethical demands, or compromising its absolute monotheism. Paul never modified the message of Christ crucified to make it less of a scandal to Jews or less foolish to Greeks. The preacher of the changeless gospel could adapt *himself* [emphasis added] however, to changing audiences in seeing their ultimate welfare, their salvation. Through his mediation of the gospel he seeks their transformation.” (David Garland, Baker ECNT, 435)

C. Paul’s ultimate motivation: Being a **fellow-partaker** with the Gospel (23)

- Paul had no choice to preach it, but by limiting his liberty for the Gospel’s sake, he became, in a sense, the Gospel’s “co-laborer”