

# 1 CORINTHIANS 9:15

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 9. In this chapter Paul asked a number of rhetorical questions to emphasize his right to have financial support as an apostle. In verse 4 he talked about his right to be supported so that he could eat and drink. In verse 5 he talked about his right to have a believing wife who would travel with him and receive support with him. In verse 6 he talked about his right to be supported so that he could refrain from working. Then in verse 7 Paul gave three illustrations from everyday life to defend his right to receive support as an apostle. The first one was a soldier, the second one was a farmer, and the third one was a shepherd. And the point with each illustration was that the worker gets to enjoy some physical benefits as he labors.

But Paul didn't just make his argument from a human perspective. In verse 9 he quoted the law of Moses and specifically Deuteronomy 25:4. This statement had to do with letting oxen eat while they were working. And Paul used it to argue from the lesser to the greater here. If we should show kindness to our animals, then we should certainly be kind to our fellow human beings as well. And one of the ways that we should show kindness is by rewarding people who work hard for us. Then in verse 11 Paul argued from the greater to the lesser. He sowed spiritual things for the Corinthians by preaching the gospel to them. And so it wasn't too much for him to reap material benefits from them. In other words, spiritual things are more important than material things. He and his missionary team had the right to receive financial support for their ministry.

In fact, Paul said in verse 12 that they had an even greater right to receive financial support from the Christians in Corinth than anyone else did. But Paul's point wasn't to get the Corinthian believers to give him money. Look at what he said at the end of verse 12: "Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right; instead, we endure everything so that we will not hinder the gospel of Christ." So Paul and his missionary team did not take advantage of their right to receive financial support. And the reason was that they did not want to hinder the gospel of Christ. If Paul had accepted financial support from the Corinthians, they might have thought that they had the right to tell him what to do and where to go. They could have told him to stay in Corinth indefinitely, or they could have told him not to go to certain places. But Paul did not want to be under any obligation to the Corinthians. He did not want his gospel ministry to be hindered in that way.

Now at this point we might think that Paul was done talking about his right to receive financial support. But in verses 13–14 he gave the strongest possible argument that he and his fellow missionaries deserved financial support. In verse 13 he pointed back to a precedent in the Old Testament. He said that the Isra-

elite priests got to have some of the food that was sacrificed to the Lord. So they did not have to work for free. They received support for their ministry to the Lord. Then in verse 14 Paul gave a more recent precedent. He said that the Lord Jesus commanded that those who preach the gospel should earn their living by the gospel. We can find this command recorded in Matthew 10 and Luke 10. Listen to what Jesus said to his disciples in Luke 10:7 when he sent them out to minister: “Remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they offer, for the worker is worthy of his wages.”

Now some liberal scholars think that Paul was basically admitting that he disobeyed the Lord. After all, Jesus commanded that men like Paul be given support, but as we saw in verse 12, Paul didn't accept it. So how should we explain this situation? We should recognize that the command is not really directed to those who deserve support but to those who are being ministered to. They have an obligation to support those who are ministering to them spiritually. So there was nothing wrong with Paul declining that support. But he wanted his readers to understand that they were right to offer support to Paul and his missionary team. So we need to make sure that we're obeying this command from Jesus. We should be giving generously to the church so that preachers and teachers of God's Word and the gospel can be supported.

Now let's look at the next verse in 1 Corinthians 9. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 15: “For my part I have used none of these rights, nor have I written these things that they may be applied in my case. For it would be better for me to die than for anyone to deprive me of my boast!” Now the Christian Standard Bible is missing a word at the beginning of this verse. But it's found in the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible. They start this verse with the word “but.” The Greek conjunction here can actually mean “but” or “and” based on the context. But the word “but” fits much better here, because there's a contrast between this verse and the previous two verses.

So in verses 13–14 Paul strongly defended his right to receive financial support for his ministry. But as we already saw in verse 12, he did not make use of this right. And here in verse 15 he returned to that theme and expanded on it. In the beginning of the verse he said, “For my part I have used none of these rights.” Now I couldn't find any translations that have the phrase “for my part.” And that's because it doesn't come directly from the original Greek text. But I do think that it's an appropriate phrase to include here. It adds emphasis to the word “I,” which comes from a pretty emphatic pronoun in the original Greek. This pronoun is the subject of the verb, but it's not needed because the verb already has a suffix to indicate that it's first person singular.

Now earlier in this chapter Paul was using mostly first person plural pronouns. In verses 4–6 he referred to himself and Barnabas. Then in verses 11–12 he referred to himself and his missionary team. So he hasn't been focusing very much on just himself. But that's exactly what he decided to do here in verse 15. At this point he was speaking only for himself and not for anyone else. And what he said about himself is that he used none of these rights. Now the Greek verb for used is found only 11 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote nine of them. Four of them are in this letter, and we've already seen the first three of them. We just saw the third one in verse 12 of this chapter. There Paul said that he and his fellow missionaries did not make use of their right to receive financial support.

Now in that verse Paul used the Greek aorist tense, which is roughly equivalent to our simple past tense in English. But here in verse 15 Paul switched to the Greek perfect tense, which is more emphatic. This tense refers to a completed action with ongoing results. So the point here is that Paul made a decision in the past not to receive financial support, and he continued to live by that decision. Now the Christian Standard Bible says that Paul used none of these rights, but there's actually no Greek word here for rights. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have a more literal translation. They both have the phrase "none of these things." The Greek word for these is neuter plural, and that's why these translations add the word "things."

But what was Paul referring back to when he used the phrase "these things"? Well, it seems fairly obvious that he was talking about his rights as an apostle. After all, when he used the same verb in verse 12, he said that he and his fellow missionaries did not make use of this right. Now there is one reason to hesitate in making this connection. In verse 12 the word "right" is singular, but in verse 15 the word "these" is plural. So Paul may have been talking about the benefits that come from this right, like food and drink. But I don't see a problem with viewing Paul's right to financial support as a collection of separate rights. After all, in verses 4–6 Paul used the word "right" in each verse to refer to a different facet of his right to receive financial support.

So when Paul used the phrase "these things" in verse 15, I think he was talking about the various rights that he had as part of his overarching right to receive financial support. And he said that he used none of these rights. But the Christian Standard Bible is missing a word here. The original Greek has a word that means "not" right before the verb. So there's actually a double negative here in the Greek text. There's a word that means "not" and a word that means "none." Now in English a double negative equals a positive, and that's why most translations don't have the word "not." The New International Version has this word, but it changes the word "none" to the word "any." So there are two negatives here in the original Greek, but it doesn't turn the statement into a positive. Instead it brings emphasis to the negative statement. We could add the word "absolutely" to convey this emphasis. Paul was saying that he used absolutely none of his rights regarding financial support.

But Paul didn't stop here. He added another statement to emphasize his point. He said, "Nor have I written these things that they may be applied in my case." Now there is no Greek word that means "nor" here. Instead the Greek text just has the same conjunction that we saw at the beginning of the verse. It normally means "but" or "and," and it clearly means "but" at the beginning of the verse. But the word "and" fits better here later in the verse. That's what we see in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. So Paul was adding an additional statement to follow up on what he said at the beginning of the verse. He was continuing to emphasize that he didn't use his right to receive financial support. And Paul did that by talking about some things that he wrote.

The Greek word for written is a verb that Paul used frequently in 1 Corinthians. It's found 18 times in this letter, and we've already seen 11 of them. In fact, we just saw it in verse 9 of this chapter and then again in verse 10. In verse 9 it introduces a quote from the Old Testament, and then in verse 10 it refers back to that quote. But here in verse 15 Paul was talking about something that he wrote. And we know from

chapter 5 that Paul had already written a letter to the Corinthian believers. In verse 9 he said, “I wrote to you in a letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.” So 1 Corinthians was actually the second letter that Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth. But in God’s wisdom he chose not to preserve the first letter for us. That’s why we refer to the second letter as 1 Corinthians.

So at first glance it seems like Paul was referring back to the first letter here in chapter 9 and verse 15. Both the Christian Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have the word “written,” which is in the past tense. But the English Standard Version and the Legacy Standard Bible put this verb in the present tense. They have the word “writing” instead of the word “written.” So which one is correct? Well, in the original Greek the verb is in the aorist tense, which normally refers to a simple past action. But sometimes a writer would use the aorist tense to describe a past action from the perspective of the readers. Now in modern times there’s not much difference between those two perspectives. If you write a letter and mail it to someone, it will arrive a few days later. And if you send someone an email, it normally arrives just a few seconds later.

But during ancient times when you sent a letter, it wouldn’t usually arrive for at least several weeks. And so it was natural that sometimes people would write letters from the perspective of their readers. When they would talk about something that they were about to do or something that they were in the process of doing, they could speak about it as though they had already done it. After all, by the time the readers received the letter a few weeks later, that thing was well behind them in the past. But was this how Paul was using the aorist tense verb here in verse 15? Was he speaking from his own perspective or from the perspective of his readers? Was he referring to the first letter that he had written to the Corinthians earlier? Or was he talking about the current letter as though it was already finished?

Well, the key here is that Paul talked about writing “these things.” This phrase comes from the same Greek word that we saw earlier in the verse. There Paul was probably talking about his rights related to financial support. But here I think he was talking about the words that he wrote regarding these rights. And that’s what he’s been talking about in verses 3–14 of this chapter. So I think it’s pretty obvious that Paul was not talking about his earlier letter to the Corinthians. Instead he was talking about this letter—the one that we call 1 Corinthians. Paul was speaking from the perspective of the original readers. And so I like the present tense verb in the English Standard Version and the Legacy Standard Bible here. They make it clear that Paul was talking about 1 Corinthians.

But when Paul used the Greek word for written here, he included a word that means “not.” It’s actually the same Greek word that we saw with the verb in the beginning of the verse. The word “not” isn’t included here in the Christian Standard Bible or the English Standard Version, but it is found in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. Now Paul went on to talk about a possible reason that he could have had for writing about his rights to financial support. But he used the word “not” to show that this was not his purpose. Here’s what he said was not his reason for writing about these rights: “That they may be applied in my case.”

Now the word “applied” comes from a very common Greek verb that can have a variety of nuances. But

as far as I can tell, the word “applied” is not one of those nuances. Usually this verb just means “to become” or “to happen.” The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible are fairly literal here with the word “done.” That’s pretty similar to the word “happen.” Now this verb is third person singular, and there’s no separate Greek word that functions as the subject of the verb. So in this situation Bible translators normally just insert a third person singular pronoun like “he,” “she,” or “it.” And the word “it” seems like the best choice here. That’s what we see in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible.

But what is this word pointing back to? There isn’t anything singular for this word to point back to earlier in the verse. If we think about what makes the most sense, it seems obvious that Paul was referring back to the phrase “these things” just a little earlier. He was talking about the words that he wrote in verses 3–14, and then he said that he didn’t write these words so that they would happen for him. So I completely understand why the Christian Standard Bible has the word “they” instead of the word “it.” The word “they” fits better with the phrase “these things” earlier in the verse. But Paul used a singular verb in the Greek because he wanted to look at these words as a whole. He wasn’t trying to get this collection of words that he just wrote to happen for him.

Now there’s another difference here between some of our translations. The Christian Standard Bible has the word “may,” but the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have the word “will.” That word makes it sound like Paul was using a future tense verb here, but that’s not the case. He just used the simple aorist tense. But the verb is not in the normal indicative mood, which is normally used for statements of fact. Instead it’s in the subjunctive mood, which often indicates that something is only potentially true. And the word “may” is a good way to translate the subjunctive mood. Paul was only talking about the possibility of having his recent words happen in his case.

Now there is no Greek word here that means “case.” The Greek phrase here is more literally translated “in me.” But I think it’s obvious that Paul wasn’t talking about something happening inside his body. So the phrase “in my case” is appropriate and gives the right idea. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible also have this phrase. Now these two translations also have the word “so” right before this phrase. The Greek word for so is not translated in the Christian Standard Bible, but it adds to the emphasis here. This term could also be translated with the word “thus,” and it’s just pointing back to the rights that Paul has been talking about. He was emphasizing that he was not writing about his rights to financial support so that he could use his rights.

Then Paul ended verse 15 by giving an explanation of what he just said. And he used the word “for” to introduce this explanation. He wanted to clarify his decision not to exercise his rights to financial support. And what he said here is that it would be better for him to die. Now the Greek word for die is pretty common in the New Testament, and it can refer to different kinds of death. Sometimes it’s used to refer to spiritual death, but normally it refers to physical death, and that’s what Paul was talking about here. In James 2 we have a helpful description of physical death. James said in verse 26 that “the body without the spirit is dead.” So physical death is a separation of the body and the spirit. When our body stops functioning completely, our spirit leaves it.

But where does our spirit go when we die physically? Well, Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:8 that “we would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” So Paul was basically saying that when Christians die physically, their spirits go to be with the Lord in heaven. This is what theologians call “the intermediate state.” Eventually God will raise our bodies from the dead and join them again to our spirits. But in the meantime we will be in the Lord’s presence. And that’s why Paul could say in Philippians 1:21 that “to die is gain” for a Christian. I’m not saying that we should all commit suicide so that we can be with the Lord. In that same verse Paul said that “to live is Christ.” We should live as long as we can on this earth to bring glory to Jesus. But when we do die, we know that we will “be with Christ—which is far better.” That’s what Paul said in verse 23 of that chapter.

So it shouldn’t surprise us too much that Paul didn’t mind the idea of dying physically in 1 Corinthians 9:15. Now in the Christian Standard Bible Paul said, “It would be better for me to die than for anyone to deprive me of my boast!” So the word “die” is followed by the word “than,” which introduces a comparison. And the English Standard Version and the Legacy Standard Bible take a similar approach here. But the New American Standard Bible is more literal here. In the original Greek Paul started to make a comparison, but then he stopped in the middle of it. The New American Standard Bible has the word “that” after the word “than,” but it’s in italics to show that it doesn’t come directly from the Greek text. The NET Bible just puts a dash after the word “than,” and that’s the most literal translation.

So we don’t know for sure what Paul would rather die than do. We might think that he would rather die than accept any financial support. But we know from other passages that Paul occasionally accepted financial gifts. In Philippians 4 he thanked the Christians in Philippi for a gift that they gave him. So Paul was probably thinking back to what he said at the end of verse 12. He said, “We endure everything so that we will not hinder the gospel of Christ.” So in verse 15 Paul was just saying that he would rather die physically than hinder the gospel. And obviously he thought that the gospel would be hindered if he accepted financial support from the Corinthian believers at that time.

Then Paul ended verse 15 with a new statement, and the New American Standard Bible has a pretty literal translation. It says, “No one shall make my boast an empty one!” The Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, and the Legacy Standard Bible have the word “anyone,” but the Greek word here means “no one.” And the verb here is just a regular future tense verb. The word “shall” in the New American Standard Bible has become a bit archaic, so the word “will” is a better choice. But otherwise the New American Standard Bible is pretty solid here. Now this Greek verb in this statement just refers to making something empty. It can be used literally or figuratively, and obviously Paul was using the word figuratively here. That’s why the Christian Standard Bible and the English Standard Version have the word “deprive.” And what Paul didn’t want to be made empty or to be deprived of was his boast.

Now the Greek word for boast refers to the act of taking pride in something. And it can be used positively or negatively. This word is used 11 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 10 of them. Three of them are in this letter, and we already saw the first one back in chapter 5 and verse 6. There Paul used the word about a bad kind of boasting, but here in chapter 9 he was obviously talking about a good kind of boasting. Paul also used this word positively in 2 Corinthians 9. Look at what he said in verse 3: “But I

am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you in this matter would not prove empty, and so that you would be ready just as I said.” So Paul boasted in the Corinthian believers, and he obviously didn’t think that there was anything wrong with it.

But we should understand this statement in light of what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1. At the end of verse 31 he quoted Jeremiah 9:24, and here’s what it says: “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” The point is that we should only boast in something that flows from what the Lord has done so that he will get the glory. So when Paul talked about his boast in 1 Corinthians 9:15, we shouldn’t think that he was boasting in his refusal to receive financial support. Instead he was boasting in the fact that the gospel wouldn’t be hindered. That was the reason he didn’t accept financial support from the Corinthians. He wasn’t trying to bring glory to himself. He wanted everything he did to bring glory to God. That’s exactly what he told us to do in chapter 10 and verse 31. We need to do everything for the glory of God. That was Paul’s motivation, and it should be ours as well. Let’s close in prayer and ask for God’s help to live for his glory.