

# 1 CORINTHIANS 9:16

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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. When Jesus sent his disciples out to minister, he told them to expect support from the people they ministered to. And in Luke 10:7 he backed up his statement by saying that “the worker is worthy of his wages.”

But then in verse 15 he reiterated that he did not make use of these rights. He wasn't defending his rights to have financial support so that he could get financial support. He said that it would be better for him to die physically than to accept support from the Corinthian believers at that time. In his judgment that would have hindered his gospel ministry. So he ended verse 15 by saying that no one would make his boast an empty one. Now he wasn't boasting in his refusal to receive financial support. He wasn't trying to say that he was better than all the other apostles who accepted financial support. Instead he was boasting in the fact that the gospel wouldn't be hindered. He wasn't trying to bring glory to himself. He wanted everything he did to bring glory to God. That was Paul's motivation, and it should be ours as well.

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 16: “For if I preach the gospel, I have no reason to boast, because I am compelled to preach—and woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” This verse begins with the word “for,” which introduces an explanation of what Paul said in the previous verse. At the end of verse 15 he talked about his boast, and here in verse 16 he elaborated on that idea. Then after the word “for” we have the word “if,” which introduces a conditional statement. A conditional statement has two parts. One of them begins with the word “if,” and the other one sometimes begins with the word “then,” which is optional. So the word “if” is the key word in a conditional sentence, and normally it comes first like we have here. This word introduces a condition that must be met for the other part of the sentence to happen or to be true.

So let's take a closer look at this condition in the beginning of verse 16. Paul said, “If I preach the gospel.” Now the words “I preach the gospel” come from just one word in the original Greek. It's a first person singular verb. There's no separate word here that serves as the subject for this verb, but that's not needed because the verb is already marked for person and number. Now this verb has the general meaning of announcing or proclaiming good news. And in secular literature it refers to many different kinds of good news. But in the New Testament it normally refers more specifically to the good news about Jesus and what he has done for us. We often refer to this good news as the gospel. We just saw that word twice in verse 14, and the Greek noun there comes from the same root as the verb here in verse 16.

Now Paul used this verb again in the first few verses of chapter 15. Look at what he wrote in verses 1–5: “Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you, which you received, on which you have taken your stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.” So Paul preached the gospel to the Corinthians, and he reviewed it for them here. It involves four elements: the

death, burial, resurrection, and appearances of Christ. The burial proves the death of Jesus, and the appearances prove the resurrection of Jesus. We need to believe all four of these facts about Jesus in order to be saved from our sins.

Now in this passage the Christian Standard Bible translates our Greek verb with the word “preached.” And that matches what we saw in chapter 9 and verse 16. In this verse the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible also use the word “preach.” But most Christians think of preaching as what happens on Sundays during the worship service. They certainly don’t think that it’s something they should be doing! But the Greek word here just refers to announcing or proclaiming. The Legacy Standard Bible has the word “proclaim” instead of the word “preach.” And proclaiming the gospel is something that any Christian can do at any place and at any time. This verb is used in Acts 8:35, which says that Philip told an Ethiopian eunuch the good news about Jesus on a desert road. This is the sort of thing that every Christian should be ready to do!

So in 1 Corinthians 9:16 Paul raised the possibility that he proclaimed the gospel. And I think it’s safe to say that he met this condition! We just saw in chapter 15 that he proclaimed the gospel to the Corinthians. And that wasn’t a one-time thing for Paul. We see him proclaiming the gospel over and over in the book of Acts. For example, in Acts 14 we’re told that Paul and Barnabas ministered in the city of Iconium. Then verse 6 says that they went to the towns of Lystra and Derbe. And verse 7 says that “there they continued preaching the gospel.” The phrase “preaching the gospel” in that verse comes from the same Greek verb that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 9:16. So Paul proclaimed the gospel of Christ in Lystra, Derbe, Corinth, and many other cities.

Now since Paul met the condition in verse 16, this means that the second part of the conditional statement is true. He said, “I have no reason to boast.” Now I couldn’t find a single Bible version that gives us a literal translation here. The Greek text literally means “there is not a boast for me.” There is no Greek word here that means “reason,” and the Greek word for boast is a noun, not a verb. In fact, this Greek noun for boast is actually the same word that we just saw in verse 15. It refers to the act of taking pride in something. Now we tend to think that boasting is always bad. And certainly this Greek word can refer to a bad kind of boasting. In chapter 5 and verse 6 Paul rebuked the Christians in Corinth for boasting about their tolerance of a professing believer in the church who was committing incest.

But this Greek word can also be used positively to refer to a good kind of boasting. Listen to what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 9:3: “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. Here’s what he said at the end of verse 31: “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” So the idea here is that we should only boast in something that points to the Lord and what he has done. That way he will get the glory.

So in 1 Corinthians 9:15 Paul was clearly talking about a good kind of boasting. And in verse 16 he was continuing to talk about boasting in a positive sense. But it seems like there’s a contradiction here in these

two verses. In verse 15 he said that no one would make his boast an empty one. But then in verse 16 he said that there was not a boast for him if he proclaimed the gospel, and he clearly did. So was Paul boasting or not? The answer is “yes,” and the key here is that Paul was not talking about all boasting in verse 16. He was just referring to a certain kind of boasting. He was saying that proclaiming the gospel did not give him a reason to boast. He had other reasons for boasting, but he could not boast simply about the fact that he proclaimed the gospel. In verse 15 he was boasting about the fact that the gospel wasn’t hindered because he didn’t accept financial support from the Corinthians.

So it’s fine for us to boast today also as long as we’re boasting in what the Lord has done. For example, many parents boast about the accomplishments of their children, and there’s nothing inherently wrong with that. But we need to ask ourselves why we’re boasting about our children. Are we boasting because their accomplishments are making them look good? Or are we boasting because their accomplishments make us look good as parents? Those are not good reasons for boasting. Instead we should boast in our children because of what God is accomplishing in them and through them. Our boasting should always draw people’s attention to God and make him look good. Even when our kids work really hard to accomplish something, we need to recognize that God is the one who gives them the strength to work hard. And the same thing is true for us as well. If we’re inclined to boast about ourselves, or if someone praises us for something we’ve done, we should always point to the fact that God was working in us and through us. Then when people see our good works, they will glorify our Father in heaven.

So in the beginning of verse 16 Paul gave us an explanation of his boasting. He said that he wasn’t boasting simply about the fact that he proclaimed the gospel. Then he offered another explanation in the middle of the verse. The Christian Standard Bible has the word “because,” but the Greek word here is the same one that we just at the beginning of the verse. It’s normally translated with the word “for,” and this is the word that we see in the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible. So this word introduces an explanation of what Paul said at the beginning of the verse. He was explaining the reason that he couldn’t boast about simply proclaiming the gospel. So the word “because” in the Christian Standard Bible is appropriate. It’s a good alternative to the word “for.”

So Paul said that the reason he couldn’t boast about proclaiming the gospel was that he was compelled to preach. Now the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have something similar. They both say, “For I am under compulsion.” But they’re missing the word “preach,” and that’s because there is no Greek word here that means “preach.” It’s been added to the Christian Standard Bible for clarification. But actually the English Standard Version is the most literal translation here. It says, “For necessity is laid upon me.” And the Christian Standard Bible has the same thing in a footnote. It just has the word “because” instead of the word “for.” But otherwise it has exactly the same wording as the English Standard Version.

So let’s follow this more literal translation as we look at the reason that Paul couldn’t boast about proclaiming the gospel. And let’s start with the word “necessity.” The Greek word here is used 17 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote nine of them. Three of them are found in this letter, and we already saw the first two of them. They’re both located in chapter 7. In verse 26 this word has the nuance of distress,

but in verse 37 it has the nuance of necessity, just like it does here in chapter 9. And we can see the nuance of necessity in 2 Corinthians as well. Look at chapter 9 and verse 7: “Each person should do as he has decided in his heart—not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver.” So when we give to the Lord, we shouldn’t give out of compulsion. We shouldn’t give because we feel like we have to. Instead we should give because we want to. We need to have the right attitude when we give.

So in 1 Corinthians 9:16 Paul was talking about a necessity, and he was referring to something that must happen. Let me give you a really simple example. There are not many things in our lives that are a necessity, but one of them is sleep. We all have to sleep from time to time. It’s impossible to stay awake indefinitely. I looked up the world record for staying awake, and it’s just over 11 days. But most people wouldn’t be able to stay awake for more than two or three days. That’s because it’s a necessity for us to sleep. Now Paul didn’t explicitly state what the necessity was in this verse. But the context makes it pretty clear. Earlier in this verse he was talking about proclaiming the gospel, and so he must have been saying that it was a necessity for him to proclaim the gospel. That’s why the Christian Standard Bible adds the word “preach.” This isn’t the best word to use in my opinion, but at least it’s pointing back to the beginning of the verse.

Now Paul said here literally that necessity was laid upon him. The Greek word for laid is used only seven times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote only this one here. But there are several good parallels in the Gospel of John. In chapter 11 when Jesus came to the tomb of Lazarus, and verse 38 says that it was a cave was a stone lying against it. Our Greek word is translated “lying” there. Then in chapter 21 Jesus had a meal with his disciples after he rose from the dead. Verse 9 says that Jesus had a charcoal fire going with fish lying on it. Once again our Greek word is translated “lying.” So we can lay something down, but we also like to lay ourselves down. And we even have a special piece of furniture for this purpose. We like to lie down on our beds when we sleep at night.

But here in 1 Corinthians 9:16 the Greek word for laid is not being used literally. Instead it’s being used figuratively because it’s not talking about a person or an object. It’s referring to the necessity of Paul proclaiming the gospel. That necessity was laid on him in a sense, and the idea is simply that he couldn’t escape it or avoid it. It was like a weight on his shoulders that he couldn’t get rid of. Let’s return to our illustration about the necessity of sleeping. When we lie down on our bed at night, our bed can’t get rid of us. It’s stuck with us until we wake up. Even then it often has to wait until we hit the snooze button a few times and finally decide to get out of bed. So in a similar way Paul was stuck with this necessity to proclaim the gospel. It was pressing down on him and wouldn’t leave him.

Now this Greek word for laid is a verb, and it’s in the present tense. The present tense indicates that this necessity was lying on him at the time he wrote this letter. And usually the present tense in Greek also conveys the idea of an ongoing action. So this necessity was pressing on him continuously. But this verb is also in the passive voice, which just means that the subject does not perform the action of the verb. Instead it receives the action of the verb. So this necessity did not lay itself on Paul. Someone else laid this necessity on him. Now Paul didn’t tell us clearly who did that, but I think it’s fairly obvious that Jesus was the one who laid this necessity on him. After all, in chapter 1 and verse 17 he said that Christ did not

send him to baptize but to proclaim the gospel. And Paul used the same verb there for proclaiming the gospel that he used here in chapter 9 and verse 16.

So Jesus actually commanded Paul to proclaim the gospel. And this happened when Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus. Paul reflected on this event when he shared his testimony with King Agrippa in Acts 26. In verses 14–18 he shared what Jesus said to him during that event. And in verse 16 God said that he was appointing Paul as a servant and a witness. But look at Paul's response in verses 19–20: "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Instead, I preached to those in Damascus first, and to those in Jerusalem and in all the region of Judea, and to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works worthy of repentance." So Paul obeyed the words of Jesus in his vision on the road to Damascus. It wasn't his idea to proclaim the gospel of Christ. Instead he was commanded to do it.

Now certainly Paul could have refused to proclaim the good news about Jesus. It wasn't a necessity in the same way that sleep is a necessity. We can't avoid sleeping for long, but Paul could have avoided proclaiming the gospel. So he was using hyperbole here when he referred to it as a necessity. He was exaggerating to emphasize how important it was for him to proclaim the gospel. But then Paul went on to explain why he called it a necessity. The next word in the Christian Standard Bible is the word "and," but the Greek word here is the same one that we've already seen twice in this verse. It's normally translated with the word "for," and that's what we see in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. So Paul was giving an explanation of the necessity that was laid on him.

Now this explanation involves another conditional statement, just like we saw at the beginning of the verse. But this one is in reverse compared to the usual order. It doesn't start with the word "if." Instead this word is in the middle of the statement. So the condition is at the end of the statement and not the beginning. Paul was ending this verse in the same way that he started it. He began and ended with a condition. These two conditions serve as bookends for this verse. And these two conditions are even focused on the same thing. In both of them Paul was giving a condition that had to do with proclaiming the gospel. He used the same Greek verb in both places. But this time Paul added a negative particle. This condition involves not proclaiming the gospel.

Now of course this condition wasn't true, because we already saw that Paul proclaimed the gospel regularly. So he was just talking about a hypothetical situation here. If he were to stop proclaiming the gospel, what would happen? The answer is found in the beginning of the conditional statement. He said, "Woe to me." The English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible say the same thing, but the Legacy Standard Bible has the phrase "woe is me." And actually both of these translations are correct, and they should be combined. The most literal translation is the phrase "woe is to me." Now the Greek word for woe just refers to a state of intense hardship or distress. It's used 46 times in the New Testament, but Paul wrote only this one. It's used seven times in Matthew 23 and six times in Luke 11. And in those chapters Jesus was proclaiming a series of woes on the Jewish religious leaders because of their hypocrisy. But this word is also used 14 times in the book of Revelation, where it refers to various judgments that God will bring on the earth during the future seven-year tribulation.

So when Paul used this word, he was basically saying that he deserved God's judgment if he didn't proclaim the gospel. After all, he would have been disobeying God! Now obviously Jesus hasn't appeared to us and commanded us directly to proclaim the gospel. But Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:18 that God "has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." And in verse 20 he concluded that "we are ambassadors for Christ." So everyone who has been reconciled to Christ is an ambassador for him. We all need to be prepared to tell others how they can be reconciled to Jesus. We all need to be ready to give an answer for the hope that's in us. There is no such thing as a Christian who's not an ambassador for Christ. If we don't ever proclaim the gospel to anyone, then it's very possible that we're not saved. So let's take our responsibility to proclaim the gospel seriously. Let's look for people we can tell about the gift of salvation through Jesus. Let's close in prayer.