

# 1 CORINTHIANS 9:17

April 28, 2024

Brad Norman

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 1 Corinthians 9:15 Paul 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.

Then in verse 16 Paul gave some clarification about his boasting. He said that he wasn't boasting simply about the fact that he proclaimed the gospel. And the reason was that he was under compulsion to preach. When Jesus spoke to Paul on the road to Damascus, he commanded Paul to proclaim the gospel. In fact, Paul even pronounced a woe on himself if he were to stop proclaiming the gospel. He was basically saying that he deserved God's judgment if he didn't proclaim the gospel. Now obviously Jesus hasn't appeared to us and commanded us directly to proclaim the gospel. But Paul taught in 2 Corinthians 5:20 that every Christian is an ambassador for Christ. We all have a responsibility to tell unbelievers around us how they can be reconciled to God like we are. If we don't ever proclaim the gospel to anyone, then it's very possible that we're not saved. So we need to take this responsibility seriously and be ready to tell others about the good news of salvation through Jesus.

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 17: “For if I do this willingly, I have a reward, but if unwillingly, I am entrusted with a commission.” This verse begins with the word “for,” which comes from the same Greek word that we saw three times in verse 16. And once again Paul was introducing an explanation of what he just wrote. In verse 16 he was focused primarily on his ministry of proclaiming the gospel, and here in verse 17 he elaborated on that theme. Then after Paul started with the word “for,” he used the word “if,” just like he did in verse 16. As we saw last week, this word introduces a conditional statement, which 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 statement to happen or be true.

So let's take a closer look at this condition in the beginning of verse 17. Paul said, “If I do this willingly.” Now the phrase “I do” comes from a present tense verb in the original Greek. And Greek present tense verbs usually indicate ongoing action at the present time. So Paul was referring to something that he did

repeatedly at the time he wrote this letter. But what action was he talking about? The Christian Standard Bible just has the word “this,” and so do most other translations. This word comes from a demonstrative pronoun in the original Greek, and it’s neuter singular. So this word is pointing back to a thing, not a person. And it seems obvious that Paul was talking about his ministry of proclaiming the gospel. After all, that was his main focus in verse 16.

But here in verse 17 Paul talked about the possibility that he proclaimed the gospel willingly. The Greek word for willingly refers to doing something without being under any pressure. This Greek term can also be translated with the word “voluntary,” which is the word that we see in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. Now this Greek term is used only twice in the New Testament, and Paul wrote both of them. The other one is found in Romans 8. Look at what Paul wrote in verses 20–21: “For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly, but because of him who subjected it—in the hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage to decay into the glorious freedom of God’s children.”

So in this passage Paul was talking about the effect of the fall on creation. When Adam and Eve chose to disobey God, their decision didn’t just have an effect on the human race. It also meant that the rest of creation was subjected to futility. This doesn’t mean that the world became totally useless. It just means that it’s now full of thorns and thistles. But Paul said that this happened “not willingly,” and he used the same Greek word here that we have in our passage. So this wasn’t something that God’s creation wanted. Instead it was forced on creation when God cursed the ground. Paul was using a literary device called personification here. He was referring to creation as if it were a person.

Now in Romans 8:20 Paul used the Greek word for willingly in a negative way. He used the word “not” with it to show that when the creation was subjected to futility, it was not willingly. But in 1 Corinthians 9:17 Paul used this word positively. He considered the possibility that he proclaimed the gospel willingly. The idea would be that he volunteered to do it without being put under any pressure. Now did Paul meet this condition? I think we have to conclude that the answer is “no.” After all, Paul just said in verse 16 that he was compelled to preach. He was under an obligation to proclaim the gospel because Jesus directly commanded him to do it. He stopped Paul in his tracks on the road to Damascus and instructed him to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

Now this doesn’t mean that Paul had a bad attitude about his gospel ministry. He wasn’t saying that he hated proclaiming the gospel and that he didn’t want to do it. It’s not that God was twisting his arm and forcing him to do it against his will. Once Jesus saved him, he was excited to tell the world about what happened to him. That’s because God changed him and gave him a new attitude toward the gospel. So Paul wasn’t talking about his current attitude about proclaiming the gospel. Instead he was referring to the origin of his ministry. He was saying that he didn’t come up with the idea of proclaiming the good news about Jesus. He didn’t wake up one morning and decide to change sides. He became a Christian and a full-time gospel preacher because of God’s direct intervention in his life. The English Standard Version reflects this interpretation nicely. It says, “If I do this of my own will.” Ultimately Paul was proclaiming the gospel because of God’s will, not his will.

So Paul did not meet this condition at the beginning of verse 17. He did not proclaim the gospel of his own will. But let's look at what would have been true if Paul had met this condition. He said, "If I do this willingly, I have a reward." The phrase "I have" comes from a present tense verb in the original Greek. So Paul was talking about something that he would have already possessed and would have continued to possess. And what he would have had was a reward. The Greek word for reward is used 29 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote six of them. Four of them are in this letter, and we already saw the first two back in chapter 3. Look at what he wrote in verse 8: "Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his own reward according to his own labor."

Now Paul wasn't talking literally about farmers here. In verse 6 he said that he planted and that Apollos watered. So he was speaking figuratively about gospel ministry. He started the Corinthian church, and Apollos nurtured it. And he said that both of them would be rewarded in the future. He was talking about the heavenly rewards that God will give us at the judgment seat of Christ. Then Paul referred to these rewards again a few verses later. Look at what he wrote in verse 14: "If anyone's work that he has built survives, he will receive a reward." So in this verse Paul was talking the quality of our Christian works. If our works are like gold and silver, then they will survive God's fire of testing. Most likely Paul was talking about motivates here. If we do any good works for God's glory and not our own, then he will reward us for those works in the future.

So in 1 Corinthians 3 the Greek word for reward is referring to heavenly rewards from God. And that's the normal nuance for this word in the New Testament. Let me show you a few more examples. Let's look at the very first place where this word is used in the New Testament. It's found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. Look at what Jesus said in verses 10–12: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you." So Jesus was clearly talking about heavenly rewards in this passage. He was saying that God will reward believers for enduring persecution.

Now let's look at the last place in the Bible where this Greek word is used. Look at what Jesus said in Revelation 22:12: "Look, I am coming soon, and my reward is with me to repay each person according to his work." Now this verse apparently teaches that Jesus would come back a short time after he said these words. But we know that he hasn't returned for over 1,900 years now. So it seems that Jesus told a lie here. But there's a better way to translate this verse, and it's with the word "quickly" instead of the word "soon." That's what the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible do here. So Jesus wasn't talking about the time of his return. Instead he was referring to the manner of his return. When he does come back, it will be quickly or suddenly. And he will reward us for our good works.

So normally the Greek word for reward refers to heavenly rewards from God. But sometimes this word refers to earthly rewards from people, and in these cases it's usually translated with the word "wages." For example, this Greek word is used in Acts 1:18, which says that Judas Iscariot "acquired a field with his unrighteous wages." It's also used in 2 Peter 2:15, where Peter described some false teachers of his day. He

said that they “followed the path of Balaam, the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of wickedness.” So those two verses are using the Greek word for reward or wages negatively. But in Luke 10 Jesus used this word positively. Listen to what he told his disciples in verse 7: “Remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they offer, for the worker is worthy of his wages.”

Now that verse should sound familiar, because we looked it just a few weeks ago. In 1 Corinthians 9:14 Paul said that Jesus commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should earn their living by the gospel. And Luke 10:7 is the key verse where we see Jesus giving this command. When he sent his disciples out to minister, he told them to accept financial assistance from the people they ministered to. Paul even quoted this verse in 1 Timothy 5:18 right after he said that the elders who work hard at preaching and teaching are worthy of double honor. So it wasn't just the apostles who deserved to be paid for their ministry. That practice should continue today with elders and other Christian leaders who help us to understand God's Word.

So Luke 10:7 is part of the background for 1 Corinthians 9:17. And this means that we should be inclined to interpret the Greek word for reward in the same way in both places. It clearly refers to earthly wages in Luke 10, and so it probably refers to earthly wages here in 1 Corinthians 9 as well. Now some people might be more inclined to interpret chapter 9 in light of chapter 3, and that makes sense to a certain degree. After all, these chapters are part of the same letter. But remember that Paul used future tense verbs back in chapter 3. He was saying that Christians will receive heavenly rewards in the future. But here in chapter 9 he used a present tense verb to talk about rewards. And the immediate context is focused on financial support.

So in verse 17 Paul was most likely talking about earthly rewards. He wasn't saying that he won't receive any heavenly rewards for his gospel ministry. He was just saying that he didn't want to take advantage of his right to receive regular wages for his gospel ministry. And that's because he was compelled by Jesus to proclaim the gospel. Now we could argue that the other apostles were also compelled to proclaim the gospel. After all, Jesus told them to follow him and be his disciples. He didn't say, “I'd like you to follow me.” He said, “Follow me.” He gave them a command, and they obeyed him. But this doesn't mean that they couldn't receive financial support for their ministry. After all, Paul just defended their right and his right to be supported. He was just saying that he didn't want to use that right. He was giving his own personal approach to this matter.

Now let's look at the second half of verse 17. It begins with the word “but,” which indicates that Paul was introducing a contrast. And then we see the word “if” again. So Paul was introducing another conditional statement, and he was contrasting the second one with the first one. Paul didn't meet the first condition, but we should expect the opposite to be true for the second condition. So let's take a closer look at this second condition. Paul said, “If unwillingly.” Now this phrase is rather brief, and that's because Paul was using an ellipsis here. An ellipsis is just the absence of words that aren't necessary. We don't do this a lot in English outside of poetry, but we see lots of ellipses in Scripture. And thankfully they're not usually too hard to interpret. Normally we can just borrow words from the context. If we borrow some words from the first condition, here's what we end up with: “If I do this unwillingly.”

So Paul was still talking about his ministry of proclaiming the gospel. But this time he approached it from the opposite perspective. In the first condition we have the word “willingly,” and in the second condition we have the word “unwillingly.” The Greek word for unwillingly is used only here in the New Testament. But it comes from the same root as the Greek word for willingly. It just has a prefix on it to negate the main idea. That prefix is the Greek letter “alpha,” which is equivalent to our English letter A. We do the same thing in English. For example, the word “theist” refers to someone who believes that in the existence of God, and the word “atheist” refers to someone who does not believe in the existence of God. But we also use the prefix “-un” to indicate this idea. We don’t have the word “awillingly,” but we do have the word “unwillingly.”

So Paul was considering the possibility that he proclaimed the gospel unwillingly, and I think we should conclude that he did, as long as we understand this concept correctly. We need to remember that he was talking about the origin of his gospel ministry and not his current attitude toward it. Unfortunately, the word “unwillingly” in the Christian Standard Bible is a bit misleading, and so is the phrase “against my will” in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. But the English Standard Version does a good job here. It says, “If not of my own will.” That phrase corresponds perfectly to the phrase “of my own will” in the first condition. Both phrases communicate the idea of origin. Paul was just saying that he didn’t come up with the idea of proclaiming the gospel.

So Paul met the second condition in verse 17, and this means that the second part of this conditional statement was true. He said, “I am entrusted with a commission.” The Greek word for entrusted is one of the most common verbs in the New Testament. Normally it just means “to believe or trust.” Paul used this verb nine times in 1 Corinthians, and we’ve already seen the first two. In chapter 1 and verse 21 Paul said that “God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of what is preached.” Then in chapter 3 and verse 5 Paul said that he and Apollos were servants through whom the Corinthians believed. So in both places Paul was talking about people who believed in the gospel and trusted in Jesus to save them.

But here in chapter 9 and verse 17 this Greek verb is in the passive voice. This just means that the subject receives the action instead of doing the action. So Paul wasn’t saying that he believed or trusted. Instead he was saying that he was believed or that he was trusted. Someone else trusted in him to do something. And the English word “entrusted” communicates that idea nicely. That’s why it’s found here in most Bible translations. But this Greek verb isn’t just in the passive voice; it’s also in the perfect tense. The Greek perfect tense is an emphatic tense, because it has two nuances. It refers to a completed action with ongoing results. So Paul was entrusted with something in the past, and he continued to be entrusted with it when he wrote this letter. The New American Standard Bible does the best job of communicating both of these nuances. It has the phrase “I have been entrusted.”

So what was Paul entrusted with? The Christian Standard Bible says that he was entrusted with a commission. The New American Standard Bible also has the word “commission,” but the English Standard Version and the Legacy Standard Bible have the word “stewardship.” However, that difference shouldn’t bother us, because these two English words are basically synonymous. They both refer to the responsibil-

ity of management, which is the primary nuance of this Greek word. Now this word is used nine times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote six of them. One of them is found in Colossians 1. Listen to what Paul said about his relationship to the church in verse 25: “I have become its servant, according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known.”

So Paul was saying that God gave him a responsibility to serve the church and proclaim God’s Word. And that responsibility is essentially what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 9:17. He didn’t mention God here, but I think it’s obvious that God was the one who entrusted him with this commission. God gave Paul the privilege and responsibility of proclaiming his Word. Now Paul didn’t use the Greek word for commission anywhere else in 1 Corinthians. But he used a word that comes from the same root back in chapter 4. Look at what he wrote in verses 1–2: “A person should think of us in this way: as servants of Christ and managers of the mysteries of God. In this regard, it is required that managers be found faithful.” The Greek word for managers here comes from the same root as the Greek word for commission.

So a manager is just someone who has been entrusted with a responsibility. And that’s what Paul was. God entrusted him with the responsibility of communicating the mysteries of God. And every Christian has a similar responsibility. We have the privilege of proclaiming God’s Word to the people around us. Now most of us don’t do it full time like Paul did. But all believers should strive to have a basic understanding of God’s Word so that we can proclaim it to others. We don’t need to have the gift of teaching or do any public speaking. We just need to be ready to share God’s truth in one-on-one situations whenever we have the opportunity. That may sound like a scary thing to do, but God wouldn’t entrust us with this responsibility without enabling us to do it. So let’s depend on his strength and ask for his help to do it well. Let’s close in prayer.