

1 CORINTHIANS 9:18

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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 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. Then in verse 17 Paul elaborated on his ministry of proclaiming the gospel, and he presented two possible scenarios. The first one was that he proclaimed the gospel willingly or of his own will. And I think it's clear that this scenario was not true. After all, Paul just said in verse 16 that he was under compulsion to preach. God directly intervened in his life and redirected him to gospel ministry.

So this means that Paul's second scenario in verse 17 was true. Paul proclaimed the gospel unwillingly or not of his own will. And this means that instead of having a reward, he was entrusted with a commission. God gave him the responsibility to proclaim his Word. And every Christian has a similar responsibility. Now of course most of us don't do it full time like Paul did. But we all need 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.

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 18: “What then is my reward? To preach the gospel and offer it free of charge and not make full use of my rights in the gospel.” Paul started this verse by asking a brief question, and then he answered that question in the rest of the verse. So let's start by looking at the question. The key word here is “reward,” and it comes from the same Greek word that we just saw in verse 17. Paul said there that if he proclaimed the gospel of his own will, then he had a reward. But since Paul was compelled by God to proclaim the gospel, this means that he didn't have a reward.

Now this doesn't mean that Paul isn't going to receive any heavenly rewards one day. In chapter 3 and verse 8 Paul said that "each will receive his own reward according to his own labor." So every Christian is going to receive some kind of heavenly reward for our service to God. But sometimes the Greek word for reward refers to earthly rewards from people instead of heavenly rewards from God. 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 of course this word can also be used positively. Listen to what Jesus told his disciples in Luke 10:7: "Remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they offer, for the worker is worthy of his wages." I read part of this verse earlier because it provides the background for 1 Corinthians 9:14. As Paul said in that verse, Jesus commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should earn their living by the gospel. 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.

But apparently some of the Corinthian believers were having a hard time accepting Paul's approach to financial support. They probably thought that Paul should have gotten some kind of earthly reward for proclaiming the gospel. Was he really not going to accept any kind of financial assistance from them? So in verse 18 Paul continued to talk about this issue. He used the Greek word for reward again, and he asked this question: "What then is my reward?" Now the word "then" comes from a Greek conjunction that's normally translated with the word "therefore." This word has the nuance of making an inference or drawing a conclusion. And that's probably the idea here in our passage. Paul was building on his discussion in verse 17 and reaching a conclusion about his earthly reward.

So in verse 17 Paul was basically saying that he didn't have an earthly reward for proclaiming the gospel. But then in verse 18 he seemed to acknowledge that he did have some kind of earthly reward. So let's look at the rest of the verse and see what this reward was. Now the Christian Standard Bible has one sentence that has three parallel statements, and they're linked by two occurrences of the word "and." It says, "To preach the gospel and offer it free of charge and not make full use of my rights in the gospel." But the Christian Standard Bible is not giving us a literal translation here. The English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible are more literal at this point. Here's what the Legacy Standard Bible says: "That, when I proclaim the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my authority in the gospel."

So there are certainly three parts to this sentence, but they're not parallel to each other. Notice that the Legacy Standard Bible does not have "and" here at all. That's because there's no Greek word that means "and" in this sentence. The Christian Standard Bible adds that word twice to make the sentence smoother, but that ruins the relationship between the three parts of the sentence. So let's stick with the Legacy Standard Bible as we study the rest of this verse. This sentence starts with the word "that," which

comes from a subordinating conjunction in the original Greek. So what this means is that we don't actually have a full sentence here. A subordinating conjunction needs to flow from a main verb.

But sometimes writers don't use a full sentence because they don't want to be unnecessarily repetitious. If Paul had wanted to use a full sentence here, he would have needed to use some of the words that he put in his question. He would have started this sentence with the phrase "my reward is that" instead of just using the word "that." But Paul decided to shorten his sentence and not make it repetitious. Now we would expect the word "that" to be followed immediately by a reference to Paul's reward. But first he added a sort of parenthetical comment. Now this phrase isn't actually placed inside a set of parentheses in the Legacy Standard Bible. But it is surrounded by commas, which has a similar effect.

So let's take a closer look at this phrase: "When I proclaim the gospel." Believe it or not, this phrase with five words in English actually comes from just one word in the original Greek. It's a participle, and in English participles normally end with the letters "-ing." So a more literal translation here would be the phrase "proclaiming the gospel." But that phrase doesn't help us to understand how the participle functions in this sentence. Participles are usually dependent on the main verb in the sentence, but generally there's a more precise relationship between the participle and the main verb. And perhaps the most common one is simply a temporal relationship. In other words, the participle is related to the main verb by time. The action of the participle can happen before, after, or during the action of the main verb.

Now in Greek this temporal relationship is indicated by the tense of the participle. And the participle here in verse 18 is in the present tense. So what this means is that the action of the participle happens at the same time as the action of the main verb. This is why the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have the word "when." So another good literal translation would be the phrase "when proclaiming the gospel." But it's obvious from the context that Paul was referring to his own action here. So most translations include the word "I" and change the participle to a main verb. But this phrase still depends on another part of the sentence, because it starts with the word "when." So this is still a fairly literal translation.

Now the Greek participle here comes from the same verb that Paul just used twice in verse 16. It has the general meaning of announcing or proclaiming good news. Now 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, and that's why most translations have the word "gospel" here. Now in chapter 15 Paul used this verb again, and then he reviewed the gospel that he proclaimed to the Corinthians. He said in verses 3–5 that it involves 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 many translations have the word "preach" here in chapter 9 and verse 18. These translations include the Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, and the New American Standard Bible. But this word is misleading, because 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. 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 9:18 Paul made a reference to his action of proclaiming the gospel. Here's what he said about his reward: "That, when I proclaim the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge." So whenever Paul proclaimed the gospel, he wanted to offer it without charge. Now the Greek word for offer is a verb that usually means "to lay or put." We've already seen this verb twice back in chapter 3. Look at what Paul said in verses 10–11: "According to God's grace that was given to me, I have laid a foundation as a skilled master builder, and another builds on it. But each one is to be careful how he builds on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than what has been laid down. That foundation is Jesus Christ."

So in these verses our Greek word means "to lay," and in both cases it refers to laying the foundation of the church. Whenever people start a new church, they should follow Paul's example and make Jesus the foundation of the church. The good news about what Jesus has done for us is the most important element in building a church. And in chapter 9 and verse 18 Paul was talking about something similar. Most translations have the word "offer" here, but that's not really what the Greek verb means. Paul was just saying that when he proclaimed the gospel, he laid it out for people to see. The gospel was like a beautiful quilt that he would spread out in front of people. That way they could see the intricate design and all the details involved in it.

Now the Legacy Standard Bible gives us the word "gospel" again, and that's because there's another Greek word here that means "good news." It's not the same word that we saw earlier in the verse. That word is a verb that refers to proclaiming good news, and this one is a noun that just refers to good news. But these two words come from the same root. Now I mentioned earlier that we already saw the verb twice in verse 16. But we've also seen the noun several times. Paul used it once in verse 12 and twice in verse 14. And in each case he was referring to the good news about Jesus. That's clearly what he was talking about here in verse 18 as well. Paul was emphasizing through repetition the fact that Jesus died and rose again to pay the penalty for our sins.

But this time when Paul talked about laying out the gospel, he added an important qualifier. It's the phrase "without charge." This phrase actually comes from one Greek word, and it's used only here in the New Testament. But there's another word in the New Testament that comes from the same root. It's used in Luke 14:28. Listen to what Jesus said in this verse: "For which of you, wanting to build a tower, doesn't first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?" The Greek word for cost in that verse comes from the same root as the word translated "without charge" in our verse. 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 sometimes 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.

So in 1 Corinthians 9:18 Paul was saying that when he proclaimed the gospel, he wanted to lay out the gospel without charge. He didn't want to ask for financial support in return for his gospel ministry. Instead he worked with his hands to provide for himself. But Paul ended this verse by adding one more statement. He said, "So as not to make full use of my authority in the gospel." This statement is giving the result of Paul choosing to lay out the gospel without charge. The Christian Standard Bible makes this statement parallel to the previous one, but that's not grammatically precise. In this statement Paul used an infinitive, and it's translated with the phrase "to make full use."

Now this Greek word is used only twice in the New Testament, and we already saw the other one back in chapter 7. In verse 31 Paul said that those who use the world should live as though they didn't make full use of it. So in that verse Paul made a distinction between using the world and making full use of it. It's impossible to live in the world without making use of it in some way. We all need to eat and drink and wear clothes, and we need to make money to buy those things. But Paul didn't want us to live as those who make full use of the world. In other words, we shouldn't be consumed with earthly things. Our lives shouldn't be filled with everything that this world has to offer. Instead of being engrossed in this world, we need to store up treasures in heaven and stay focused on what matters for eternity.

Now in 1 Corinthians 9 Paul was making a similar distinction. In verse 12 he said that he did not make use of his right to have material benefits provided for him. In verse 15 he said that he used none of his rights to have financial support. And in both verses he used a verb that comes from the same root as the one that we have here in verse 18. But this time Paul added a prefix to the root to intensify its meaning. So it doesn't just mean "to use something"; it means "to make full use of something." And what Paul didn't make full use of was his authority in the gospel. The Greek word for authority is translated with the word "right" in the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible. The Christian Standard Bible has the word "rights," but the Greek word here is in the singular. And it's the same word that we've already seen five times in this chapter. It appears once in verse 4, once in verse 5, once in verse 6, and twice in verse 12.

Now this Greek word normally means "authority" in the New Testament. But sometimes it has a different nuance and refers to a right that someone has. And in this chapter Paul used it consistently to refer to his right to have financial support for his ministry as an apostle. So I disagree with how the Legacy Standard Bible translates this word throughout chapter 9. The word "right" is better than the word "authority" here. Now in verse 18 Paul talked specifically about his right "in the gospel." The word "gospel" comes from the same Greek noun that we just saw in the previous statement. Once again it's referring to the good news about what Jesus has done for us. Paul was just saying that he had the right to receive financial support in his role of proclaiming the gospel.

But of course his point here is that he didn't make full use of this right. He was giving us some clarification about what he said in verses 12 and 15. We might think from those verses that he never accepted any financial support from anyone. But we know from other passages that he did occasionally accept a gift. Listen to what he said in Philippians 4:16: "For even in Thessalonica you sent gifts for my need several times." So Paul found a balanced approach on this issue. He didn't want to be paid a salary by a church,

but he was willing to accept an occasional gift. So he did make some use of his right to receive financial support. But he didn't make full use of it, because he didn't want to be hindered in his gospel ministry.

So 1 Corinthians 9:18 shows us what Paul's earthly reward was for proclaiming the gospel. His reward was basically not to get a reward! Now this doesn't mean that Paul didn't receive any sort of immediate blessing for refusing to accept regular financial support. Listen to what he said the elders of the Ephesian church in Acts 20:34–35: "You yourselves know that I worked with my own hands to support myself and those who are with me. In every way I've shown you that it is necessary to help the weak by laboring like this and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, because he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" So Paul understood that there's great joy in giving to others without receiving anything back. When we give a gift to someone, we're not expecting anything in return. We're not looking to be paid back for our gift. That would ruin the joy of giving the gift!

So Paul was certainly blessed to minister to the Corinthian believers without charge. But ultimately he was motivated by being able to proclaim the gospel without any hindrance. He knew that by not accepting regular financial support, he would not be under obligation to anyone. Instead he would be free to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. So for Paul the gospel was a reward in itself. He found great joy in being able to proclaim the gospel without charge in a wide variety of places. Now we may not travel to as many places as Paul did. But we should be looking to share the gospel wherever we go as well. There are unbelievers all over the globe who need to hear about what Jesus has done for them. So let's be ready all the time to tell people about Jesus. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to do that.