

Meats and Idols, Knowledge and Love – Part 2

The Gospel Ox: His Rights and Restraints – *1 Corinthians 9:1-18*

Introduction – In Chapter 8, Paul called upon the strong at Corinth to restrain their freedom for the sake of the weak. In the last verse (8:13), he points to himself as an example of this principle. Anticipating the objection of the strong, “Am I not free?”, Paul now unpacks that argument and its goal which is the proclamation of the gospel of free grace.

Apostolic Rights (vv1-14) – In our individualistic mentality, we can often think that if we have freedoms, we ought to have the privilege of enjoying those freedoms. So why would Paul give up eating meat that has no power to hurt him? Paul answers by explaining other rights he has given up. Paul is a free man, an apostle, and clearly one who has sealed his authority in the work he has done in Corinth (vv1-2). As an apostle and a minister of the gospel, he is entitled to make his living (and even to support a family if he had one) from that work, just as the other apostles, or a Roman in the military, or a farmer or a shepherd (vv3-7). But Paul does not only have human arguments (v8). He turns to the teaching of the Old Testament and applies the principle of a muzzled ox having the right to eat from the grain he treads (v9, Deut 25:4). A working ox, or a working minister, ought to plow and thresh in hope of receiving material gain (vv10-11). Other apostles had done so, and even if Paul had not used this right, he did have the right (v12). In fact, it was the same right that the Levitical ministers in the temple, who ate from the offerings brought to the Tabernacle and later to the Temple (v13). Finally, Jesus Himself had said that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel (v14, Luke 10:7). Paul’s point: He had the freedom, status, and rights to financial support from the Corinthians, and he had it in spades.

Apostolic Restraints (vv15-18) – “*Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ*” (v12a). Now Paul turns to the main point of his argument. While he has those rights, he consciously sets them aside for the sake of the gospel. He makes clear he has not written these things to convince them that they should now support him (v15). Paul writes very personally now. He has nothing to boast in if he preaches the gospel. He is not in it for the money. In fact, he is not even in this ministry voluntarily (vv16-17). Remember, just a few minutes before his conversion, Paul was breathing threats and murder against the Christians (Acts 9:1-2) and then was called into this ministry (Acts 9:3-6). And so, it is his reward to preach the gospel without reward (v18). He preaches for free so that he might minister for free; his wholehearted devotion to the Lord is its own reward. Following Christ, Paul is willing to give up that which he would be free to partake (Chapter 8) or receive (Chapter 9), in order to win, protect, and keep new believers to Jesus.

Learning from the Ox – Here is a man who does not find his glory in his money or status or comfort or rights and entitlements. He finds his glory in the gospel and in the Christ of that gospel alone. That is enough, and yet these verses also teach us secondarily some important things.

Learning from the Ox verses – Paul cites Deut 25:4 here and in 1 Tim 5:18 to make the case that elders and ministers who labor in word and doctrine are worthy of financial support. Using that verse, we learn from Paul that we must study the Old Testament carefully and with proper Bible study methods in order to rightly understand and apply the Scriptures. A careful study of the chapters surrounding this verse reveals that the application Paul has here is apparent there.

Learning from the Tithing verses – But where would this support come from? We also see in v13 that Paul assumes the practices of tithes and offerings from the Old Testament are in still to be practiced in the New (Deut 14:22-29). We are still to tithe from our increase (v22), learning to fear God (v23), doing so with joy and feasting (vv24-26) and not forgetting those who minister to you (vv27-28). Back in Corinthians, Paul will continue, “*Even so...*” (v14) – that is, in the same manner, Jesus commands the same.

Freedom to Preach the Gospel Freely – As Paul came to the end of his life, he reflected on the blessing this priority on preaching the free grace of the gospel, and to do so freely, had allowed him to preach the whole counsel of God without fear and without shame (2 Tim 4:1-8). To preach the gospel is to state every doctrine contained in God’s Word, giving every truth its proper place. It means preaching when they want to hear it and when they don’t. It means preaching what they want to hear and what they don’t. It means refusing to tickle itching ears. The message of the cross is a message of hard words and God uses those hard words by His Spirit to make soft hearts. The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (1 Cor 1:18), and God promises to use the power of that foolishness to bring the world to its knees before Him (Phil 2:5-11).

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Notes for Little Saints

One of the important things to learn from these verses is how much we are to love the gospel of Christ.

Look at 1 Corinthians 9:12

Paul is willing “to _____ *all things lest we hinder the gospel*”

As we learn what a gift and a privilege, we have in knowing Jesus Christ and having our sins forgiven, it follows that we will often give up so much that we could demand in order to let others know about the gift of God.

As children, one of the things you should see your parents giving up is time and money and so much more, so that you can have a Christian education. They love the gospel, and they love you, and so they gladly give up much. Maybe you could write them a thank you card.