

Paul Our Example: Paul and His Rights

1 Corinthians 9

Turn to 1 Corinthians 9 please. We will eventually get to 1 Corinthians 9, but I'm going to have a long introduction to that sermon. Our ultimate model in the Christian life is Jesus of Nazareth. We imitate Christ as much as we can. He is our hero, our champion, and our supreme example.

The New Testament gives us several important followers of Christ who are also models for us. I mean people like Peter, and John, and Mary, and Barnabas. Among the followers of Christ, the New Testament tells us a lot more about one person than about any other follower, and that one is Saul of Tarsus, Paul the apostle.

So I'm going to spend a few minutes now telling you how much the New Testament tells us about Paul. I am not telling you that he's wonderful, though I think he is. I'm just showing you how much information the New Testament gives us about this man, far more than about anyone else other than Jesus. We have three main sources of information about Paul.

1st Source About Paul: The Testimony Chapters in Acts – Acts 20, 22, 26

In Acts 9, Luke the writer tells us about Saul the persecutor meeting the Lord on the road to Damascus, and how the Lord called him to preach the gospel. We learn much just from that story in Acts 9. But in Acts 22, and again in Acts 26, Paul is a prisoner defending himself in court, and he gives a long testimony of his life before he met the Lord, and how he met the Lord, and his life after that.

Each of these two, Acts 22 and 26, includes details not in the other story. Between the two, we learn more about Paul. We get both of these in detail.

Paul was in Ephesus 3 years, then he left, and came back later and spoke just to the elders of that church. We read this in Acts 20. He reminded them of how he had lived with them during those years, and he encouraged them to live the same way. It is a careful summary of his service to that church. We learn how he served the church when he stayed in a city. He sure lived a focussed lifestyle. These testimony chapters – 20, 22, 26 – tell us much.

2nd Source about Paul: The Paul Stories in Acts

We have stories of Paul's evangelism and mission, starting in Acts 14, and then from Acts 20 to 28 we have stories of Paul's imprisonment. Luke was travelling with Paul for much this, so we get a close up account. We also have Peter stories in Acts, but in Acts we have a lot more Paul stories than Peter stories.

Acts has 28 chapters. There is no evangelism after the middle of Acts 19, a full third of the book. Did you know that? Some think that Acts is about the spread of the gospel. That only happens if we stop reading after Acts 19, and we usually do, because all the fun stuff stops there.

But Luke the writer was not nearly done. Acts 20–28, the last third of Acts, is like a text book on how Paul lives faithfully with chains, and prison, and accusations, and corrupt judges. Those chapters are a big part of Luke’s plan for that book. No evangelism, but lots about Paul.

3rd Source about Paul: His Transparency in His Letters

By the end of Acts, we know considerably more about Paul than about any other follower of Christ. And we still have not touched his letters. In Paul’s letters, he was often transparent about his thoughts, how he processed different challenges and successes and disappointments. Our text today, 1 Corinthians 9, is one example of this.

This openness was unusual in the ancient world. It is a little more common now, but at that time, no one did that. Peter and John and James don’t talk about themselves anything like Paul does. They don’t describe their thought processes as Paul does. Here’s an example.

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do. . . For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Romans 7

Most of us instantly identify with these words, even if we think we should be better. It is the universal human experience. But who actually talks like that? Who says it? Very few.

So, to summarize this all, we know about Paul from his testimony chapters in Acts, from the many Paul stories in Acts, and from how he explains himself in his letters.

Paul lived an exceptional life, and he knew it, and he knew why. When he tells how the Lord called him, Paul says, *“I am the least of the apostles, and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”*

Paul lived an exceptional life because God was showing his great grace on a great sinner. God turned a persecutor into an exceptionally faithful follower of Christ. Paul himself was not exceptional, and he knew it. God’s grace on Paul was exceptional, and he knew it.

I’m telling you all this about Paul for two reasons. One, so that you will understand that the New Testament itself, the inspired Scripture, gives us one follower of Christ in particular to understand and to learn from.

Two, I have met believers who decided that they did not like Paul. They set themselves up as Paul’s judges, and were offended by what they viewed as his shortcomings. If you hear stuff like that, people, don’t listen to it. God himself is the ultimate author of our Scripture, and we can see from our New Testament that God wants us to imitate Christ the way Paul imitated Christ.

(Jesus was actually more offensive than Paul.)

Now the long introduction is over. We'll survey 1 Corinthians 9, one place where Paul explains himself. We'll read about Paul's rights, and the rights of the Corinthian believers.

Ask yourself: What do you want to do or be, above all else? What one thing needs to happen for your life to succeed? What is the one place where you do *not* want to fail?

4 Competing Athletes and the Christian Life – 1 Corinthians 9:24–27

The Greeks had athletic games like our Olympics, and they included track and field and boxing.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

This paragraph concludes Paul's teaching about rights. We're starting today at the end of the story, the end of 1 Corinthians 9. Competing athletes train, they use self-control in how they live because they have a goal. They want to win, they want to get the prize.

Paul likes this picture and uses it a few different times to describe what it is like to follow Christ. And this is for every believer. This picture from sports is normal Christian life for ordinary Christians in ordinary churches. (1 Timothy 1:18; 6:12; 2 Timothy 4:7)

If the goal of the athlete is to have a comfortable satisfying life, that athlete will not win the race or the fight. Does the athlete have as much *right* to a comfortable and satisfying life as all the other Greeks living around? Yes, of course, the athletes certainly have the same rights. But if they always make use of their rights, they will never win.

The purpose of the athlete is not to have a comfortable satisfying life, but rather to win. The athletes really do want to win. They are hungry for it and they long for it. Their desire to win is stronger than their desire for nice food and relaxed life. That purpose makes a big difference in what athletes do with their rights.

When you want something more than you want a comfortable pleasing life now, it is not a big deal to let go of things that are good. If you hang on to them you can't accomplish what you really want. Humans are entirely capable of denying themselves enjoyments to do something more important to them. Competing athletes are only one example.

I do *not* mean that following Christ equals a life of spiritual discipline, no enjoyment of the good things of life. I do *not* mean that. Paul writes elsewhere, *don't pursue money because God generously gives us all kinds of good things to enjoy* (1 Timothy 6).

1 Corinthians 9:25 *Everyone who competes in the games goes into training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.*

5 The Problem in Corinth – Strong Christians with Knowledge – 1 Corinthians 8:9–13

Now we go to the beginning of the story, 1 Corinthians 8:9. Some Corinthian believers, the strong ones, knew that idols of stone and metal were not real gods at all, and that animals offered to these idols were still fine for Christians to eat. They were right about that.

But new Christians in Corinth, weaker Christians, had just a little while ago been worshipping and serving these stone and metal gods, and to them these gods were real. For these weaker Christians, eating that meat was actually worshipping those gods.

Paul tells the strong believers, the ones with knowledge, *Be careful that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak* (8:9). That is the important line.

The weaker Christians see mature Christians eating idol meat. As far as these weak Christians are concerned, these strong mature Christians are worshipping both Christ and idols. And so the weaker brothers and sisters start doing that too, only, to the weaker brothers and sisters, they really are worshipping these other gods.

In a short while they worship idols again, their faith is destroyed, they've gone right back. The strong ones, by their knowledge, and by using their rights, have destroyed their weaker brother or sister.

6 Paul and his Rights – Imitate Me as I Imitate Christ – 1 Corinthians 9:1–15

Now Paul tells us about one of his rights that he did not use. He had the right to be fed and clothed and housed by the people to whom he was preaching the gospel. But he did not use this right, because he found that preaching the gospel worked better if he was not taking anything from the people listening.

He was in Corinth about one and a half years (Acts 18:11). The Corinthian Christians know very well that Paul did not take money or food from them when he started the church there. I will read 9:1–15. Paul defends his right to have the Corinthians care for him.

9:1 - *Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?* ² *Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.*

³ *This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me.* ⁴ *Don't we have the right to food and drink [since I am indeed an apostle]?* ⁵ *Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?* ⁶ *Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?*

⁷ *Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink the milk?* ⁸ *Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn't the Law say the same thing?* ⁹ *For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned?*

¹⁰ Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? ¹² If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?

But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.

¹³ Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. ¹⁵ But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast.

Paul really did have the right before God to get his living from the gospel. The apostles did, the Lord's brothers did, the law of Moses commanded it, and the Lord Jesus himself also commanded it when he sent them out. But Paul found out that sometimes this hindered the gospel. It put some people off. So Paul stopped taking money from those listening to him.

The Lord did not tell him to stop taking food and shelter from the people he was serving. The Lord told him to preach, but Lord gave him the right to food and housing from the Corinthians. But Paul wanted the gospel to do as well as possible, he did not want to put anyone off, so he supported himself by his trade, learned in much younger years. He made tents.

Paul goes on in 9:16: *For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so **not** make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.*

Paul was compelled to preach the gospel, he had no choice. He had an internal drive, a desire he could not ignore, he could not help himself, he had to preach. But offering the gospel free of charge: that was his own choice, not the Lord's command.

In this whole chapter, 1 Corinthians 9, Paul is giving the Corinthians and giving us a model to follow. In chapter 11 says, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

It is not wrong for Christians to exercise their rights. The apostles and the Lord's brothers made use of their right to food and shelter, and there was nothing wrong with that. Some Corinthian believers used their rights to eat idol meat, and though they did have that right, it was wrong, because it wounded their brothers and sisters in Christ.

This Scripture does not give a clear outline of what Christ's followers should do with their rights. What *is* clear, though, is that we cannot make good choices about our rights until our first desire is to serve God and bring him glory, to follow Christ faithfully. When that is our first desire, when that is our definition of success, *then* we can make good choices about our rights.

7 Paul's Use of His Freedom: Slave to Everyone – 1 Corinthians 9:19–23

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

The Lord told Paul to preach the gospel, and Paul wanted the gospel to succeed. He wanted that as much as any athlete wanted to win. To do this, Paul would join in many things that were not his convictions. He stayed obedient to Christ's law, but that still gave him a lot of leeway.

So he adapted himself to the convictions and consciences of those he was with, whatever their convictions and consciences were, all kinds of people, so that they felt at home with him. That way his actions did not distract those people from hearing the gospel. *"Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible."*

8 Again, Competing Athletes and the Christian Life – 1 Corinthians 9:24–27

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for your grace to Paul. Thank you for your kindness to him, by making him a good imitator of Christ. Thank you for telling us so much about him. O Father, pour this kind of grace out on us. Work in us, so that we will want to do what pleases you, and so that we will do it. Thank you for the ways in which you already do this. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.