

RIGHTS OR WRONGS

by Ray C. Stedman

In Chapter 9 of First Corinthians, the Apostle Paul is still answering the question that these Corinthians had asked him, "Is it right to eat meat that has been sacrificed to an idol?" Although none of us would have asked that question of Paul, behind it is the greater question that we most certainly would have asked him, and that is, "How far should we go to adjust to the conscientious scruples of other people?"

This raises the whole issue of, "How far must I insist on my rights?" We all wrestle with this very pertinent question. In fact, this is much before us today. You cannot turn on the television without seeing scenes almost every day of some crowd of people demanding their rights. This is the spirit of the age. Somehow or another, if you have a right you have to demand it.

I am getting so tired of hearing the word "demand," as though the existence of a right makes it necessary that someone demand that he be given that right. The question every Christian has to face is, "How far should this affect me? Do I have the right to demand my rights, especially with regard to the limitations on my personal liberty, because of the scruples of someone else?"

In Chapter 8, which we have already seen, the apostle has shown us that we have no right to injure another person's faith by the exercise of our liberty. We have no right to make it difficult for a brother or sister in Christ to grow spiritually because of what we do. If we do that, the apostle says, we not only sin against our brother, but we sin against Christ, for the essence of the Christian spirit is being willing to adjust to the needs of someone weaker than you.

Now, in Chapter 9, the apostle is dealing with the difficulty that some would have with this view. There were in Corinth, as I am sure there are here this morning, people who said, "Well, I am not going to give up my rights as a Christian to be free to drink, or to attend various places of amusement, because some legalistic brother is injured or hurt by what I am doing." There were many who were willing to rebel there. They said, in effect, "We are too mature; we are too advanced in our knowledge of Christian doctrine to make that kind of adjustment."

In Chapter 9, the apostle uses himself as an example of this. He says:

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. {1 Cor 9:1-2 RSV}

There are some preachers who, in commenting on that text, have thought that Paul was defending his apostleship here. I do not think he is. Rather, he is asserting it. He is basing his argument on his understanding that they knew he was an apostle. He is saying that if knowledge is the ground of defending and demanding their rights, then he has an even greater basis for it than they did. If they had knowledge, how much more did he who was an apostle, a chosen spokesman of the Lord Jesus?

This was undeniable to these people at Corinth. They knew that he had seen the Lord on that dramatic occasion when, in the dust of the road to Damascus, a light brighter than the sun had shone around him. The Lord Jesus had identified himself when Paul said, "Who are you, Lord?" by replying, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," {cf, Acts 9:5}. But the Lord did not appear to him on that occasion only. In this very letter Paul tells us there were occasions when the Lord appeared to him, and taught him directly. A little later in this letter he is going to say to them, "I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you," {1 Cor 11:23a RSV}. He will detail for us the events of the Upper Room when Jesus and his disciples, without Paul, in the privacy of that room, did and said the words that established what we call the Lord's Supper. Now, how did Paul know about it? Well, the Lord had told him. He had appeared to him. He had taught him on numerous

occasions all the truth that is reflected in these apostolic letters. We must never forget when we are reading the Apostle Paul we are reading the mind of Christ, for the apostle was taught by the Lord himself.

Not only that, these Christians in Corinth owed their very existence as a church to him and his apostleship. They were the proof that he was an apostle. As such he taught them all that they knew. It was his obedience to his apostolic commission that had brought him to Corinth in the first place. His visit had changed their lives, had brought them out of darkness, and had brought glory and beauty and truth once again into their existence. They knew that, and now he is arguing on that very basis. He says, "If I am an apostle, and I have this knowledge that is greater than yours" (as he will now go on to say in the next twenty verses), "nevertheless I do not exercise all my rights. You object to giving up some rights for the sake of others. Well, I want you to know that is what I have been doing for you for a long time."

This is his argument, and beginning with Verse 3 and on through Verse 23 we have his commentary on that.

First, the rights that he really did possess:

This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to our food and drink? Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord [James and Jude], and Cephas? [that is another name for Peter] Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?" {1 Cor 9:3-6 RSV}

Here is the answer to many questions people raise about the ministry. "Should ministers be supported by a congregation?" Many, especially among youth today, are raising that question. For a long time people have been convinced that when you become a preacher you do so in order to be a parasite, to make a living off someone else, and they see no justification for that kind of action.

Paul argues this very strongly:

1. First, he says, "We have the right to have food and drink supplied to us in our ministry -- a right to eat, a right to be taken care of, a right to have everything we need materially furnished to us." (Notice that he does not say the right to steak and champagne.)
2. Further, he says, "We have the right to marry, and to have our wife supported, and to have her travel with us, just like Peter and some of the other apostles, and even the brothers of the Lord himself did."
3. Third, Paul says, "We have a right not to have to work for our living."

I know a lot of people who think that nobody in the ministry works. I have had people come up to me, and say, "Oh, you have an easy life. You only work one day a week. What do you do anyway from Monday to Saturday?" They see nothing involving demand, or work, or labor of any sort in the ministry. Paul, of course, does not mean that there is no work involved in the ministry. He is talking about having to do secular work in order to earn a living. He says, "We have the right to be set aside and supported so that we can give our full time to preparation, to study, to prayer, and to the preaching of the Word. There is no question about it."

He then proceeds to give us the basis for that right, Verses 7-12):

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? {1 Cor 9:7 RSV}

He says no one ever labors in these three occupations and does not reap as a result and is supported by his efforts. A soldier is a good case in point, he says. Soldiers do not earn a living working at a trade, or a craft, or a profession, but they are supported nevertheless. Someone who works in the vineyard is at least allowed to partake of the fruit while he is working. Even someone who takes care of a flock of sheep can drink of the milk, so that custom supports the idea that it is perfectly proper for those who benefit from a ministry of others to share with them in the material needs of that individual.

Custom supports it, Paul says, and second, the Law of Moses says the same (Verse 8):

Do I say this on human authority? Does not the law say the same? For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain." [From this many have drawn the conclusion that ministers are oxen, and they are allowed to snatch a few bites of grain now and then. No, Paul goes on:] Is it for oxen that God is concerned? {1 Cor 9:8-9 RSV}

Is that why he said that? Yes, it was originally. God is concerned about oxen. He does not want animals abused, beaten, and mistreated, and that is why he said it in the first place.

But Paul argues:

Does he not speak entirely for our sake? [And his conclusion:] It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of a share in the crop. {1 Cor 9-10 RSV}

What Paul says is, "God said this in the beginning because of his concern for oxen, but he wrote it down for our sakes and passed it on through the Scripture because, by means of it, he wants to teach us the same principle." That is, this is the principle that runs all through life, that if you reap the benefit of someone's ministry you ought to have a part in it in a material way. This is why we take offerings, and why finances are an important part of the life of a church, because it makes the ministry possible. I know I do not have to argue that with most people here, but it does perhaps answer some of the questions that some of you have asked from time to time.

This is a beautiful lesson here on how to use the Old Testament. This is why even these common rules and regulations about animal care were written down, to instruct us about our relationship, one with another. That is the way God teaches from the past.

But then there is also a certain logical fairness about this, Paul goes on to argue (Verse 11):

If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? If others share this rightful claim upon you, do not we still more?

Nevertheless, we have not made use of that right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. {1 Cor 9:11-12 RSV}

This becomes, then, a principle that ought to be universally recognized. When you are blessed and helped by someone, simple gratitude would dictate that you do something in return to show your gratitude. That is what Paul is arguing here. If you have been blessed and helped in your spiritual life, and your family changed and your whole life enriched, how much more, Paul says, should you not therefore support with material benefits those who helped you in this way?

I was in Tucson, Arizona, a week or so ago with a young man who is in the Christian ministry. He told me about an incident that happened a year or so ago when he was in the State of Washington, ministering to a couple who were older, partly retired, but still engaged in a business that was making them quite a bit of money. This couple had a difficulty between them that was long standing and it was ruining their relationship. This young man was able to pray with them, and teach them about themselves, and lead them to a place where they forgave one another. Their relationship was healed, and, over the course of several days, it was evident that a total change of atmosphere had come into that household. As he was about to leave, they called him into the living room, and they said to him, "We are so grateful to you for helping us, we want to express our gratitude to you. You told us about how you are trying to buy a motor home to take your family with you on your ministry, and we want to have a part in that." Without any solicitation on his part, they handed him a check for \$16,000. That was the value they set on his ministry with them. They were blessed and strengthened and helped to such a degree that they expressed it in that kind of a grateful acknowledgment of how valuable his ministry to them had been.

Paul adds one final support for this in Verses 13-14:

Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? {1 Cor 9:13 RSV}

He is referring, of course, to the care of the Levites in the Old Testament days when the sacrifices were divided up among them. They actually ate of the meat and of the meal, and they used the wine and the oil that was brought there. This was commanded by the Lord. Now Paul says (Verse 14):

In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. {1 Cor 9:14 RSV}

That ought to forever answer all the arguments of those who say that ministers are parasites who live on other people. Unfortunately there are ministers who have given a bad name to the ministry because of their laziness and self-indulgence. But the apostle argues very powerfully here that the Lord himself has commanded that this is the principle by which his ministry should be carried on. There is absolutely nothing wrong with it.

I want to point out something here, and it is very necessary to add this. In Paul's case, as it should be in every case of someone wanting support, the ministry comes first and then the support -- not the other way around. In the New Testament you never read of anybody going out to raise support in order to go out to take on a ministry that he has not done anything in yet. It is the demonstration of a ministry that is the basis for the raising of support, and we need to apply this today. Many young people have come to us asking to be supported to go out into a foreign field. They have been rightly challenged in their lives; they see the opportunity and they want to respond. It is sincere and earnest on their part, and God bless them for it. They are willing to give up certain advantages of living here in the United States and deprive themselves and their families to go out to difficult places. That is a marvelous thing, but what they ought also to understand is that there is a need to demonstrate before they go that they can do something in a ministry. It does not have to be teaching always. Sometimes just to show a helpful spirit, a willingness to help clean up some older person's backyard or help them with some difficulty they are having indicates that here is someone who is willing to minister and not to be ministered unto. That is the basis, then, for asking for support.

There are a lot of religious rackets going on today that are extracting money in large amounts from a gullible Christian public that never asks the question, "What is really being produced by this ministry?" They are contributing to the luxurious affluence of so-called Christian leaders who ought not to be supported at all, because these people are using it for their own advantage. These are very wise words, therefore, that the apostle is giving us here -- ministry first and then support.

But now Paul comes to his point. All this has just been building up to what he has been wanting to say. He proves that he had the right to be supported, but he did not always exercise that. When he came to Corinth he had deliberately chosen not to, although he did receive support at times from other churches, as he tells us in his letter to the Philippians and so on. But at Corinth he did not. Look at Verse 15:

But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have any one deprive me of my ground for boasting. {1 Cor 9:15 RSV}

He feels very strongly about this. He says to these people, "Look, I would rather die than have you take away my right to give up my rights. That is a right I insist on having." The right to give up his rights, that is the greatest right a Christian has. Paul says, "This means everything to me." "Well," you say, "why did he feel so strongly about it?" His answer is in Verses 16-18:

For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am [still] entrusted with a commission. {1 Cor 9:16-17 RSV}

What is he saying? Many have misunderstood this. What the apostle is saying, basically, is, there is no sense

of pride and achievement that came to him because he faithfully preached the gospel. He said that is not the reason why he is willing to give up his rights, because he wanted to be faithful to his commission to preach the gospel. No, on the contrary, he says he really has no choice about preaching the gospel, "necessity is laid upon me." In other words, "If I do not preach I am perfectly miserable. I have really no choice in this matter. I would much rather preach than experience what I know I am going to experience if I do not: the lash of my conscience, the sense of failure in what God has appointed me to do. I cannot live with that. Woe is me if I preach not the gospel." He says, "If I do it willingly I gain a reward." (He will tell us in a moment what that reward is.) He says, "If I accept this commission from God, and joyfully do what he tells me to do, it is to my great advantage. I enjoy it; I am fulfilled; but whether I like it or not, I have to do it."

A friend was telling me not long ago about a missionary doctor who worked among the lepers in Africa. On a visit to his friends in England, he was telling them about the unpleasant conditions he had to work in. These patients would come in with running sores that were so putrid and foul that he could barely stand to be around them. They lived under the most trying and primitive conditions, and these people were often totally ungrateful for what the doctor tried to do. One of the ladies listening to him said, "Well, you must love these people tremendously to go out and serve them the way you do." He said, "No, I don't. It isn't love. I find it very difficult to love somebody who reeks with a horrible odor. I would much rather walk away and leave them there to die in their filth. It is not love." "Well," she said, "what is it, then?" "Duty," he replied.

There is nothing wrong with a sense of duty. There is nothing wrong with this feeling that God has given you a job to do, and you have to do it whether you like it or not. Many of us are uneasy with that kind of a motivation, but Paul felt it. He said, "There is no choice for me in the matter of preaching. Whether I like it or not I have a commission to fulfill, and if I want my life to be worth anything at all, I had better do it." That drives him out to preach. But that, he says, is not the reason why he does it without charge, why he earns his own living making tents so that no one else will have to support him. What is the reason?

He tells us in Verse 18:

What then is my reward? Just this: that in my preaching I may make the gospel free of charge, not making full use of my right in the gospel. {1 Cor 9:18 RSV}

He did make use of his right sometimes, but not in Corinth. There he made the gospel free of charge. What he is saying is simply that the thing that motivated him, the thing that drove him to work late hours at night making tents so he would earn a living and would not have to be supported by anybody in the church in Corinth, was the sheer delight it gave him to bless and enrich someone else without taking a penny in return. It was the joy of giving that Paul was experiencing.

There are so many religious racketeers around that it is fun sometimes to surprise people by not asking anything for your ministry. I have had that joy.

A few years ago I was invited by some missionaries to go to the south of France to hold a Bible conference with them. They needed to be refreshed from the Word of God, but I knew too that they could not afford it, and they told me so when they called. They said, "We cannot afford to give you an honorarium." I said, "That is all right with me. I will come anyway. Can you meet the expenses of the trip?" I asked. They said, "Well, we will certainly try." I knew that they were going to try out of very meager salaries, as they lived in one of the highest cost of living areas in the world, and yet were laboring in a very needy place.

So I went to France. Through a misunderstanding of communication I was not met at the airport in Lyon, and I sat there for 24 hours waiting to be picked up. I finally got out to the conference ground which was an old Roman Catholic convent along the Rhone River, south of Lyon. We had a great three or four days together just feasting on the riches of the Word of God. I saw their spirits uplifted, changed, and blessed as they learned the truth of the Word again in their lives and hearts. At the close of the conference they came to me and said, "We have put together a check from all of our contributions here. We do not know if it is enough, but it is all we have got, so here it is." It was not enough; it hardly covered half of my expenses. But I had the exquisite pleasure of turning the check over and endorsing it on the back and handing it back to them, saying, "You use this to establish a fund to bring other speakers in to minister to you in the future."

To see the joy and unexpected surprise in their faces was all the reward I needed. I went away, richly repaid for that ministry.

This is what Paul is talking about here. It was his joy to go about the Roman Empire and give people something for nothing. He saw them come to a dawning awareness that what he had given them was the greatest thing they had ever had in their lives, enriching them beyond their wildest dreams, freeing them, helping them, healing them, and making them whole. To do so without asking a single penny from them in return, that, Paul says, was his delight.

What form did this take in a practical way?

Well, he goes on to describe it. Here we have this famous passage about his relationship to man (Verse 19):

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. {1 Cor 9:19 RSV}

"I am free," he says, "I am an apostle. I have knowledge beyond anything you have. But that does not mean that I demand my rights. No, I am glad to give them up, freely, willingly, that I might win the more."

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; {1 Cor 9:20a RSV}

He was willing to go back under the old restrictions that he had been brought up in, all the old limitations of ritual and ceremony and outlook, in order to move back in alongside his Jewish brethren and be understood by them. He was willing to live again as a Jew when he was with them.

To those under the law I became as one under the law -- though not being myself under the law -- that I might win those under the law. {1 Cor 9:20b RSV}

To those who were still under dietary restrictions and various limitations on their activity, Paul says he was willing to do the same, though, he says, he was not himself under the law.

To those outside the law [i.e., the Gentile world] I became as one outside the law -- {1 Cor 9:21a RSV}

"When I was with them I ate their food, even food offered to idols. It did not bother me. I did not feel any restrictions, because I was trying to reach these people." Then, lest they misunderstand the implications of being outside the law, he adds,

-- not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ -- {1 Cor 9:21b RSV}

-- which is the law of love, the law of freedom. So never lawless, nevertheless he became as outside the law with those who lived that way in order that he might win them to Christ.

To the weak I became weak. {1 Cor 9:22a RSV}

He adjusted to the conscientious scruples of those who did not yet have liberty to do some of the things that he felt free to do. What a picture! What an example!

I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. {1 Cor 9:22b RSV}

That is the great verse in which the apostle declares this spirit of selfless accommodation to where people are. That is what ought to characterize the Christian approach. We should be willing to set aside our own personal desires in order that we might win a hearing and open a door for a witness about the Lord. He never denied principle, never compromised in the realm of immorality, but nevertheless adjusted to the outlook of those with whom he was.

Then once again you get the reason for it in Verse 23:

I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. {1 Cor 9:23 RSV}

The gospel -- the good news that God has given to us without any merit on our part. To give it without expecting anything in return, that is the character of the gospel. Paul says he enjoys the exquisite pleasure of giving without thought of return.

For many years, as our family was growing up we would have the Christmas tree at Christmas with all the presents around it. Everybody in the family would look forward to that time. The presents kept growing, and we would wait for Christmas Eve to come when the family would open the gifts. When the magic moment came we would all gather in the living room, and after reading the Christmas story together we would begin with the children's gifts. Elaine and I would have gifts in that pile, but, if we had our way, we would just leave them there until all the others were opened. Perhaps we would even forget to open them ourselves. What we were after was not the gifts that were waiting for us -- those were of minor significance -- what we wanted to see, our reward, was the joy on the faces of our children when they opened their gifts. Every Christmas I felt amply rewarded for whatever the gifts may have cost in terms of money or struggle. I saw the joy and happiness light up my children's faces when they were surprised by getting something that they long had wanted and did not know they were going to get.

That is what Paul is saying. What a joy to go about and give people things for which you do not demand anything in return.

That is the Christian spirit.

I want to close with these words of C. S. Lewis. I think they are significant, and pertinent to this issue:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be rung, and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell.

The apostle is saying that to demand your rights is to condemn yourself to emotional poverty, because that is all you will get -- your rights.

Jesus said it best, "It is better to give than to receive," {cf, Acts 20:35}.

Prayer

Lord, teach us to be giving people, generous people, not wanting something back, not always asking, "What's in it for me?" Help us to not be squeezed in the mold of the world around us that always wants an exchange. Teach us to be like yourself, Lord, to give freely and gladly and be quite content, even though nothing is given back. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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