

Study 12: 1st Corinthians Chapter 9

Introduction

Chapter 9 is an interlude in the discussion on meat sacrificed to idols. The underlying problem was their pride in doing things that caused others to stumble. The Corinthians claimed that their freedom in Christ allowed them to do the things that they did. Paul compares that to the freedom that he has as an apostle, and shows the disciplined approach to which such freedom ought to be used.

Body of the Study

Paul's appeal to his apostleship

What are the arguments for support of workers?

Should it always be the case that workers are supported?

How did Paul demonstrate his servanthood?

The example of the athlete

The consequences of our behaviour

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *Paul describes the way in which he has made sacrifices in his life for the gospel. What are some of the things that you have given up in your life for the sake of the gospel?*
- *What are some of the practical ways that we can “become everything to everybody” in order to spread the gospel?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read Chapter 10 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 12: Chapter 9

Introduction

Chapter 9 makes an interlude in the discussion on meat sacrificed to idols. Whilst the eating of such meat was a real problem for the Corinthians, underlying it was the issue of their pride in doing things that would cause others to be upset. The Corinthians were claiming that they were using their freedom in Christ to do the things that they did. Paul compares that to the freedom that he has as an apostle, and shows how such freedom ought to be used.

Body of the Study

Paul's appeal to his apostleship

Everywhere Paul went, his apostleship was challenged. The Judaisers made the claim that Paul wasn't a real apostle, as he wasn't one of the twelve – and that they had come from the real apostles in Jerusalem – and consequently the Judaisers should be listened to over Paul. In most of his letters, Paul asserts his apostleship and therefore establishes the authority for everything that he had to say.

One of the qualifications for an apostle was that they had to have seen the Lord (compare Acts 1:21-22). Incidentally, Paul's challenged position as an apostle shows the futility of that office being a continuing one, although it is (theoretically) possible that the Lord could continue to appear to people to qualify them for the office in exactly the same manner as He did to Paul. The consequence of such an appointment is that the things that they teach, say, do, and write should be written down and added to the scripture – which is something that even most who claim to be apostles today refuse to do.

The evidence of Paul's apostleship may have been weak amongst some brethren, but that should not have been the case in Corinth. Paul had been involved in the beginning of the church there, had spent 18 months working with them on the second journey (Acts 18:11), and then for another 3 months on the third journey (Acts 20:3). The confirmation of Paul's work as an apostle was the miraculous spiritual gifts (2:12:12). In a tongue-in-cheek way, Paul is saying, "If you are questioning my apostleship, just think about the miraculous gifts. I wonder how you got them...?" Paul had been active in teaching and converting many in the church in Corinth, although he did not baptise many of them (1:1:14-16). He says "...aren't you my work in the Lord?...I might not be an apostle to others, but you of all people should know better...For you are the seal of my apostleship..." (my paraphrase of 1:9:1-2)

Those who came teaching the gospel had a right to be supported. Paul (apparently) did not take any financial support from the Corinthians. In fact, he says, "...I robbed other churches so as not to be a burden to you..." (2:11:8). Paul's critics had (apparently) made a play of the fact that he had not taken any support from them and were saying that it was because he was an imposter. His answer to the critics is that he has every right just as the other apostles to live and be supported by the gospel. Were that not the case, then he and Barnabas would be the only exceptions to the rule!

Paul's comments reveal some interesting information. He explicitly tells us that Peter was married, which is supported by his (Peter's) position as an elder (1Pet 5:1; 1 Tim 2:2). Paul also implies that he is not married – although that doesn't mean that he wasn't once married – he may have been a widower. Ramsay¹ argues that the question that the Corinthians had asked Paul about marriage "Is it to be regarded as a duty incumbent on all Christians to marry?" would never have been asked if Paul had never been married. His comment on Barnabas shows that whilst Paul and he had split up three years beforehand (Acts 15:38-39), Barnabas was still of note by those amongst the church, and was still of some influence.

¹ Ramsay, William "Historical Commentary on First Corinthians" ISBN 0-8254-3637-0 p.70
Study of Corinthians by Graeme Offer

What are the arguments for support of workers?

Six arguments are made to show that support for the workers of the gospel is right and proper.

1. Being paid for service is right and proper in employment. He gives three examples of this – the soldier, the vineyard keeper, and the shepherd.
2. The Law of Moses supported wages for work. The example given is that of not muzzling oxen that tread out the grain. They were to be free to eat as much of the grain as they desired (Dt 25:4). Paul's point is that the reason that such an instruction was written was for God's people as an example, not just for the sake of the oxen.
3. Proper exchange demands that we should receive something for what we give. Paul brought great spiritual blessings to the Corinthians, and whatever physical support that he might receive in return was nothing by comparison.
4. Consistency of dealing with others. The Corinthians recognised that they would be expected to be paid for the work that they did for others, and also they would normally expect to pay others for doing work for them. The context suggests that this was other workers in the church who had come since Paul had left, and had been supported by the church. They needed to apply this same principle to Paul.
5. The Priests (both the OT religious workers and those in the pagan temples in Corinth) ate of the things of the temple, and they had every right to eat the things that were brought as offerings. The apostles and other workers in the Lord's vineyard have exactly the same right.
6. The Lord ordained that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel. Jesus gave this instruction to the disciples when He sent them out (Mt 10:5-10; Lk 10:7-8). Paul makes a wider application of the verse than the specific mission that Jesus sent the disciples on.

Should it always be the case that workers are supported?

Having established the case that the workers in the gospel should be supported by it, Paul chose not to accept it, and on several occasions worked to support himself (Acts 18:3 – the specific occasion was in Corinth). Paul shows by his example that whilst it was right and proper to accept support for the work that he was doing amongst the churches, it was just as right and proper to not accept support. His reason for doing this was because he did not want anyone to say about him that he was only in it for the money “...*I would rather die than have my reason for boasting taken away...*” (1:9:15). The only thing that he wanted to boast about was his work in preaching the gospel, and no one could say that his motives were not with the gospel and that alone. In fact “...*I feel compelled to do so; I should be utterly miserable if I failed to preach it...*” (1:9:16 JB Phillips).

Paul's motives were pure. By implication, those who would make accusations against him (claiming that he was not a real apostle) did not have the pure and demonstrated motives nor credentials that he had.

Beyond his compelling need to preach, Paul was given a specific role in taking the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 26:16-18), and with such a stewardship entrusted to him, he was fully obliged to discharge it.

Further, as an apostle Paul was in a position of authority. Those in such positions need to ensure that they do not abuse the power that they have. Jesus was the master example, who came in the form of a servant. Paul was fully following His example in becoming a servant to those to whom he preached.

How did Paul demonstrate his servanthood?

“...*I have made myself a servant that I might win the more...*” (1:9:19 NKJV). The examples that he brings are complete – Jewish, those under the Law, those outside of the Law, the weak, in fact all things to all men.

There are some puzzling things in this passage. Did Paul compromise God's teachings and patterns? Paul was a Jew, and he knew and observed the Jewish customs. Although the Jewish

Law was nailed to the cross (Col 2:14) and to continue to keep the Law whilst being in a covenant relationship with Christ was spiritual adultery (Rom 7:1-4), Paul observed the *customs* of the Jews in order that he might convert some of them to Christ. This was as also a nationality issue for Paul.

But Paul was in a unique position. Not only was he a Jew, but he had Roman citizenship and had a Greek education. He understood the Gentile culture that he lived in perfectly well. He was fully cognoscente of the Gentiles, and was determined not to do anything that would offend them and turn them away from listening to the gospel. There is nothing implied here to say that he did the things that Gentiles did that was out of character with the life of a christian. He is not saying (for example) that he went to the idols temples to “worship” (and do the other things that they did there) in order to influence the Gentiles to the gospel. There are many modern-day examples that we could draw from this, and we discussed some of them in the last study.

The key is in Paul’s approach as a servant. He was mirroring the life and example of Christ. Paul fully realised the enormity of the responsibility that lay on his shoulders, and he was not lax in discharging it. He could say “...*from Jerusalem to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ, and I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man’s foundation...*” (Rom 15:19-20)

“...*I do all of this for the gospel’s sake, that I may be a partaker of it with you...*” (1:9:23 NKJV)

The example of the athlete

The Corinthian (Isthmian) games were held every second year, and ranked closely behind the Olympics as one of the great sporting events of the time. Rather like the Commonwealth Games (the Aussies reading this will well understand the idea – I’m not sure about any Americans who might read it). The Corinthians would be fully aware of the examples that Paul is to bring.

Paul’s own life was characterised by the type of discipline that the athletes exhibited. The first example is that of a runner. We have multiple example of modern athletes today, who totally give up a *normal life* so that they might compete at an elite level. They get up very early every morning and train for hours, their diet is totally geared towards their sport, their workout program is designed so that their peak performance is on the day of the race, and with many of them they also have a day job. In most cases, it takes them 4 or 5 years to head towards the elite level, and they start training towards not the next Olympic games, but the one after that. After all of the effort, only the one winner gets anything at the end.

In the end, what does the prize mean? Today, you get a medal, a picture and your name in the history books. In Corinth, you got a laurel wreath that would soon decay. None of the history books (that I am aware of) bear the names of the winners of any of the events.

In contrast, in the christian race, there is not one winner, but everyone wins the prize, and the prize is awaiting us in heaven that will not fade away nor corrupt, and our names are written in the book of life! How great is our reward by comparison! Why would anyone bother with the vanity of the athletics, when we could put our efforts into spiritual directions?

The key message that Paul brings is that we should run the race of our lives in exactly the same dedication and discipline that the elite athlete brings to his sport. “...*so run that you might obtain the prize...*” (1:9:24)

The next example is that of the boxer. He is in the ring, and the arms are waving about and shadow-boxing. He is using up a lot of energy, but the punches aren’t delivering anything. Like the runner, he has trained hard and dedicated himself to the task. But he is not getting anywhere. After all of the training, when the time comes to perform, we need to make of our punches count. The example of the boxer is a good one, as we can spend a lot of effort and energy in making a lot of noise and *waving our arms around* for nothing. We need to ensure that our efforts are directed to where they will have the most effect.

The behaviour that Paul calls us to only comes through discipline. “...*I discipline my body and bring it into subjection...*” (1:9:27 NKJV)

The consequences of our behaviour

Paul describes the consequences of his behaviour “...*lest after I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified...*” (1:9:27 NKJV)

Despite the things that Paul had gone through, and the things that he had suffered for the sake of the gospel, it was possible that he might miss out in the prize. We need to note here that Paul said that it was possible that he could miss out on his eternal reward. The word that Paul uses – disqualified (Gk 96 *adokimos*) is translated in other places as “God gave them over to a *reprobate* mind” (Rom 1:28); and note the context from Hebrews:

“^{HEB 6:4} It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, ⁶ if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. ^{HEB 6:7} Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. ⁸ But land that produces thorns and thistles is **worthless** (*adokimos*) and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.” (Heb 6:4-8 NIV)

The clear implication is that our behaviour can cause us to be lost. This does not fly in the face of the eternal security of the believer – because no one can take it away from us. Only we can let it go. And if we do let it go, then there are eternal consequences.

Paul very well understood that message, and demonstrated to the Corinthians (and us!) how we “...*ought to behave ourselves in the church...*” (1 Tim 3:15)