

The liberty to love

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[0 : 00] Let's prepare our hearts for the preaching of God's Word. I believe in Jesus, but I don't go to church.

That's what my Uber driver said to me on our drive back to my apartment from the Chicago International Airport. I'm telling you, man, all these churches, all they care about is your money and asking you to give.

Well, back then, my immediate response was to tell him to not let one bad apple spoil the bunch, that there are many good churches out there. But the more he told me, the more I realized I was dealing with someone who has sustained heavy injuries from a betrayal of trust and abuse of authority.

Unfortunately, misuse of church funds has only gotten more common in recent years. In 2015, after our five-year investigation process, six leaders from a megachurch in Singapore were convicted of misappropriating \$50 million Singapore dollars for their personal gains.

And even in coaching, it's not too infrequent that we hear stories of churches tracking church members' givings month by month, calling and pressuring them when payments are late.

[1 : 42] Now, of course, it is within our rights to not give to these churches, to not give to organizations with suspicious financial dealings. But the truth is, the church is just one of many avenues where you and I get to exercise our rights.

As individuals with free will, we can choose whether to take or not take the vaccine. As citizens of a democratic country, we elect our leaders.

As educated people, we make decisions on what jobs we take, what properties we invest in, what kind of person we date, how we carry ourselves both in appearance and in character inside and outside the church.

So although the secular world says Christianity is a strict and rigid faith, the truth is, when you look at it, there are not that many things when the Bible gives a hard yes or a hard no.

Christians are given much liberty to agree or disagree on many topics. And just last week, we saw that the Corinthian church used theological arguments to fight Paul's ban of eating food sacrificed to idols.

[3 : 07] In today's passage, Paul's opponents go from attacking the teaching to attacking the teacher. They come at Paul and say, how can someone like him be trusted?

More specifically, how could someone who lives and works so differently than all the other teachers and philosophers carry any sense of authority?

So please turn now to 1 Corinthians 9 if you haven't already. 1 Corinthians 9 continues Paul's teaching on Christian liberty.

Paul starts off by defending his apostolic authority, but crucially, he will show you and I how we can contextualize to the culture around us for the advancement of the gospel.

Our text can be divided into three movements. Enjoy freedom because of the gospel. Exercise freedom to advance the gospel.

[4 : 21] And employ self-control in benefit of the gospel. Let's pray. Sovereign Lord, creator of all things, sustainer of all life, open our minds and sharpen our ears as we ponder how to best steward the freedom that you've entrusted us.

In Jesus' name, amen. Enjoy freedom because of the gospel. Enjoy freedom because of the gospel.

Paul starts off with a barrage of rhetorical questions. And the first two make up the topic that he will spend the next 14 verses defending.

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Well, the rhetorical answer is yes, I am. But how? Well, Paul has seen the risen Lord.

On the road to Damascus, what Paul saw was more than just a vision. He encountered the resurrected and ascended Jesus.

[5 : 33] Now, granted, many people have seen the risen Lord, but not all of them have become apostles. So what sets Paul's encounter with Jesus apart from the others is the commission.

Galatians 1, verse 16 records that Jesus reveals himself to Paul to explicitly send him to, quote, preach among the Gentiles.

Paul then goes on to establish churches throughout Asia Minor. And so, almost sarcastically, Paul turns the Corinthians' argument against them.

He says at the end of verse 1, are you not the result of my work in the Lord? the fact that the Corinthian church exists is the very proof that Paul is a true apostle.

But he continues, even though I may not be an apostle to others, namely, to those who are in the church who are second-guessing his authority, surely I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

[6 : 42] Essentially, what Paul is saying, hang on a minute, if I am not a true apostle, then you, Corinthians, who came to Christ from my teaching are not true believers.

You realize the hypocrisy? You realize the inconsistency? Then you are believers who are not truly in the Lord. Which Paul then goes on to address the topic of financial support.

Now, his tone in verses 3-14 is largely defensive, which tells us that Corinthians are the ones who use Paul's lack of a paycheck to try to discredit him.

You see, in the Greco-Roman world, teachers and wandering missionaries made a living through fees, patronage, working, and sometimes even begging.

How could someone who is not getting paid for his teaching be legitimate? Well, this logic is not that hard to understand, isn't it?

[7 : 50] If Toyota told you it would cost you 500 ringgit to fix your car and a random guy comes in and says, hey, I'll do it for 50. Hey, you know what? I'll do it for free. Would you dare hand him your keys?

In Corinth, Paul worked. He obtained his livelihood in Aquila's workshop, which made his apostolic authority in the eyes of the Corinthians even more questionable.

If his teaching is authentic, why would he need to work a side job? Paul answers their questions by two ways.

First, by insisting that he does have the right to be paid, but second, by telling them why he chooses not to be paid.

Let's look at verse 3. This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. Don't we have the right to food and drink? 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?

[8 : 57] Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living? Paul argues that just because his way of life is different from the other teachers, that does not mean his teaching lacks credibility.

The truth is, like these teachers, Paul has every right to get a pay, every right to take a wife as a companion, and every right to not have to work at a trade to make ends meet.

He illustrates in verse 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?

Well, like the owner of a vineyard, Paul should be expected to live of his produce. Like a shepherd, Paul should be expected to be sustained of his flock.

But why doesn't he do that? Well, in case people accuse Paul of basing his argument on simple illustrations, the apostle turns immediately to authority from Scripture.

[10 : 18] He cites from Deuteronomy 25.4, Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain. As we can see from this picture, ancient farmers drove oxen with a threshing sledge over the grain to separate the kernels from the stock.

Now, in its original context, this law was given out of mercy for the animal to not muzzle it so it can eat and enjoy some of the benefits of its labor while it is treading out the grain.

Now, that is certainly what Deuteronomy 25.4 means in the Old Testament. But Paul knows his audience well. He knows the Corinthians following ancient Near Eastern customs are used to

treating laws as analogies.

So, in the same way, Paul looks past what the law means in its original context to how it applies in the present situation.

Paul says, hey, if you, Israel, if Israel knew how to extend mercy to a brute beast, how much more does God know and extend mercy to his chosen people?

[11:43] So, whether it's the plowman who plows or the threshing animal who thrashes, both should fully expect to reap the rewards of their labor.

Paul then applies this analogy to his current argument. Verse 11, if we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?

If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? While others here refer to Peter and Apollos, who, in fact, they did take payment from the Corinthian church.

So, now you can see why the Corinthians are suspicious of Paul. because in their eyes, Paul's continual refusal of a patronage made it seem like he did not have the rights to payment and that he is somehow less legitimate compared to the other apostles.

But Paul corrects them by saying, no, no, no, no, no. As the one who sowed the seed of the gospel among you, I have every right to be paid.

[12:58] just because I don't use these rights doesn't mean I don't have them in the first place. So, even though Paul had the right to be paid, he chose not to do so.

Why? Quote, verse 12, so as to not hinder the gospel of Christ. You see, secular teachers and philosophers, they often customize the flavor of their teaching to please the ears of their patrons. And so by not taking any payment, Paul illustrates that the gospel is free. It is unbound by human nature, unbound by greed or the temptation to twist the truth.

Well, some of you are aware that I grew up in a Methodist church. And before I went to my theological training, I had the opportunity to, of course, receive funding from the denomination. But at that time, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do with my ministry. And the idea of being a Methodist pastor dedicated to preaching Wesleyan theology for a good chunk of my life with no other options didn't sound too appealing.

[14:31] So, I went to Chicago with a little bit of cash and struggled to find a job my first year. Now, would you know it, the first department at my Bible college that hired me literally had me scrubbing kitchen grills and cleaning toilet bowls.

But looking at where I am now, I can honestly say those hours spent with the brooms and brushes are worth it. Because there's no way I would be able to be on a church planting journey had I taken that offer initially.

And there's no way we would see another gospel center church on top of KEC rise out in the city of Kuching. So although our situations are not entirely similar, Paul insists that his freedom to not receive pay illustrates the freedom of the gospel.

In verse 13, Paul turns to the temple. 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? Now this of course refers to the Old Testament priests who did not have land so they obviously couldn't farm couldn't till the soil so they couldn't till the soil so they didn't have food.

[16:00] So their physical nourishment came from sharing in the food sacrifice to idols. So they could eat sorry their first physical nourishment came from the food sacrifice to Yahweh so they could share in the food that was offered at the temple and they could sustain their bodies.

Paul then cites Jesus in Matthew 10.10 as he sends up the twelve Jesus commands the apostles the twelve disciples to earn their keep by staying eating and drinking at the houses of those who welcome and host them.

So as the one Christ sent to the Gentiles Paul also has a right to be paid. So with all these illustrations Paul makes it abundantly clear just because he does not receive payment does not mean he is not entitled to them.

Number two exercise freedom in advance to advance the gospel. Exercise freedom to advance the gospel.

Paul continues in verse 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.

[17:36] So in a strange twist Paul says he did not mention his rights so the Corinthians could go oh let's feel sympathy and they start paying him. He's just showing off how noble he is by not

accepting pay you know the kind of situation we meet when we have guests no I pay no you pay I'll pay right that kind of back and forth so that people will feel you know what I can give you Paul isn't doing this to secure material rights according to Paul to accept money from the Corinthians would deprive him any reason for boasting now we must tread carefully here Paul isn't boasting in his rejection of payment to put down the other apostles who took money because it was you know well within their rights to do so but for Paul there is a personal element to this for

Paul the fact that he did not accept money shows both his weakness but also his trust in God's will verse 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 here Paul beautifully outlines the sovereignty of God's call God has so ordained Paul and his destiny since his birth to be a messenger to the Gentiles and on the road to Damascus the apostle encountered the resurrected Christ and Jesus had so taken hold of his heart that Paul is compelled to preach Christ wherever he goes Paul's logic is simple you get paid for what you choose to do but since

I didn't choose to preach but I preach to honor God's call for me therefore I do not need pay but does it mean not receiving money does that mean that Paul's work and ministry and his own labor is in vain not quite let's read verse 18 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 now at first glance this verse seems kind of strange so Paul's reward for preaching is no pay what does he mean by that but if we pause and think about it what Paul is doing here is he tying his own ministry to the gospel since the gospel of

Jesus Christ is the salvation to all free salvation to all who would come and accept and turn to Jesus since that's the gospel free so is Paul's ministry free even though the gospel offers Paul's rights to be paid for and to live by preaching it Paul chooses not to do so to illustrate that the gospel has set everyone free now Paul's financial independence was not the only issue that people raised against him for some of his opponents were not happy with his inconsistent attitude towards food sometimes he was kosher other times he was not in answer to the objections

Paul says that hey because I don't take payment from anybody nobody has any right to tell me to do anything as the slave of Christ Paul belongs to no one other than Jesus himself now of course Paul isn't going around just eating food as he pleases hey look at me dude I can eat this you can't just to rub it off on people and show off such freedom rather the apostle has one focus in mind the salvation of all people verse 19 among the Jews Paul practiced a kosher diet no pork no shrimp that might be difficult to some of us that's what it was no pork no shrimp and he became quote like one under the law so that he could win the

[23 : 12] Jews to Christ among the Gentiles however Paul ate whatever was put in front of him seafood sure lobster amen without raising any questions or objections the key difference lies in the fact that Paul is neither obligated by the law and unlike his Jewish companions Paul see Paul still shows respect to the law whenever he has to but unlike his Jewish peers he is not obligated by the law and crucially here it is he does not rely on the law for salvation he honors it but that's not how he is safe and so he wants to show the Jews that's how the law should be lived out Paul adds a third category to the weak

I became weak now in context weak means those who are of a lower social class okay weak refers to those who are of a lower social class so by choosing to work with his own hands Paul is able to associate who had to work your nine not nine to five nine to nine who did hard labor in order to make ends meet and so regardless of the setting Paul had one focus in mind the advancement of the gospel friends what we see here is an expert example of contextualization depending on he was with Paul adapted his lifestyle to illustrate that the gospel is free he showed them that in Christ Jesus has come such that all who are in him are no longer bound by any set of tradition or any set of rules that we may freely express ourselves as we proclaim the good news sadly this Christian liberty the liberty that Paul talks about here has not captured the minds and hearts of many Christians growing up in the church I have I was taught many restrictions first it was Harry Potter don't let your kids watch Harry Potter they said otherwise he might fall into the traps of the devil well one wonders if watching a film is enough to snatch a child of God from God's hand is Jesus really that powerful did he really defeat the devil on the cross another one is poker cards believe it or not

I distinctively remember as a youth being yelled at by one of the church ladies when she saw us playing cards now we weren't gambling but the mere sight of poker cards was enough to agitate her

now later found out that her husband has a you know addiction in gambling and background but as Tim Keller would say if you have to fear something and run away from it and ban it that thing still has a lot of control over you if you have to put so much conscious effort then you are still enslaved by that thing whether you are the one yelling at people or the one being yelled at the ironic thing is that most of these bible forbidden things we ban them our reasons for ban them are most of the time believe it or not cultural not biblical if theology is the study of God let me ask this is there a theoculture is there a theoculture a culture where God looks at the way it views every social and moral issue and says yes give them my endorsement and my signature this is the chosen culture is there a theoculture well depending on who you ask everybody will say it's my culture or has God allowed us to uniquely express the gospel such that by the end of days we are like different pieces of mosaic that ultimately form a beautiful picture perhaps next time we encounter a different expression of Christianity such as the Corinthians do when they see [28 : 42] Paul who is not taking any pay we would do better to ask questions before we judge and listen before we condemn number three employ self control in benefit of the gospel now Christian freedom of course I'm not saying that Christian freedom is to be taken for granted and abuse because Paul gives us the virtue behind all rights in the final verses self control see by insisting on their rights to go to the temples and participate in food sacrifice to idols the Corinthians are showing their lack of restraint their lack of discipline so to drive his point home Paul uses the metaphor of a race verse 24 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 now the

Christian life is like a race not in a sense that it's a competition with the brother who's sitting next to you but in a sense that there is a prize waiting for us when we finish the run so with this goal in mind we run and Paul continues 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 now NBA superstar LeBron James reportedly spends 1.5 million dollars each year just on his body that includes cryotherapy hyperbaric chamber personal chefs and trainers and even in his 18th season and at 37 years old LeBron is still one of the best performing players this season but the best reward that LeBron can get is a championship and probably maybe a stronger case for being the best player of all time but all of those are things that will fade and decay over time Christians according to Paul receive a crown that will last forever no athlete competes to be in the last place so we run in such a way to get the goal to get this crown that will be given to us at the end of days verse 27 no I strike a blow to my body sorry verse 26 therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly I do not fight like a boxer beating the air we're not like people who run on treadmills not seeing what the destination is we're not like boxers who punch in thin air with no goal but as Paul says I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others I myself would not be disqualified for the prize in preaching to the Corinthians Paul made a conscious choice to work with his own hands he subjected himself to economic physical hardship all for the gospel such that he might share in its benefits enjoy freedom because of the gospel exercise freedom to advance the gospel and employ self control in benefit of the gospel but as sisters how can we run in such a way as to win the prize 1st

Corinthians 9 shows this a perfect example Paul shows this an example of how he contextualized his life to tackle the idol of the Corinthian church to a Corinthian culture obsessed with status Paul says look I'm not going to be paid I know you guys love money I know you guys love status but I'm going to do so I'm going to show you and illustrate that the gospel is free perhaps some of you are discontent maybe it's at your job surely someone with your capabilities and education deserve to work for a company that can make use of your gifts service surely you can go to a different city to advance your career but is there a place perhaps

[34 : 18] God has placed certain individuals in your life right here perhaps he has put you in certain social circles so you can be a minister of the gospel in the same way the coronavirus has indoctrinated us to personal safety and comfort it's definitely within our rights to prioritize our health but look out there there are many people who are lonely there are many people who need contact the most ironic thing about a city is that people are close together physically but far apart emotionally is there a place for us to put down our rights to sacrifice maybe our convenience to go out and love the city brothers and sisters have you used your

Christian liberty well or have you masked your personal agendas behind the name of rights and freedom to continue to hold on to what is dear to you now I suspect that at this point some of you

may feel frustrated some of you may feel discouraged at the poor job that you've done some of you may feel like you found a new goal a new thing to do but the good news of the Christian faith brothers and sisters is you don't have to make the right call in every situation you don't have to be the best person in the world and contextualizing the gospel because God neither accepts or rejects you based on how well you have you are or you will adapt your life for the gospel I'm not just giving you one more thing to do so you can take away this morning so you can continue to go back to your roots of self righteousness for what you and I have failed to do God accomplished through his son in Jesus we see the ultimate example of contextualization the king who had all the power and all the glory gave it up just so he could come to earth Christ subjected himself to a human body he knew what it was like to be hungry he knew what it was like to be tempted he knew what it was like to be rejected when the Roman soldiers flogged him Jesus had every right to stop them yet whip after whip nail after nail he endured it all on the cross when the people walked by mocked him hey aren't you the son of God why don't you save yourself and come down he could have done so he had a right to do so but he did not before his final breath Jesus experienced the greatest tragedy of all the weight of all human sin on his shoulders and as a result the anguish of separation from his father my God my God why have you forsaken me but three days later he rose again he conquered death so you and I can be free but as sisters as we stand before the cross we recognize we have no rights there's nothing in this world that could make us worthy of the salvation that Jesus won for us at the same time the cross reverses the value system of this world in Jesus there is no right we cannot give up even if the things that we hold dear to our children our career our reputation our fame our money even if all those things were taken away we can still fall back on the security of [39 : 43] God's love that Jesus redeemed for us when we realize that everything we have is not ours and everything we own is won for by Christ then we can freely give up any rights for the preaching of the gospel and the advancement of the kingdom let's pray Lord we thank you for the saints who have gone ahead of us for the apostle Paul who demonstrated the freedom that we have in you and Lord we recognize that immediately our response is to take Paul as example take Jesus as example our natural roots so drive us to think about how we can make ourselves better but Lord we don't have to for Christ for you Lord died for us on the cross you showed us that we are owed nothing and we don't need to earn anything so I pray for each one of us in our respective circles to identify the idols to identify what people around us are holding dear to and help us to adapt and customize and contextualize our lives to show them that the gospel truly sets all free we pray this in Jesus name amen