

- c. Paul's rights were neither self-devised nor self-serving, but were inherent in the very nature and fact of his calling and authority as Christ's apostle. They were rights Christ Himself had bestowed upon him – first, by virtue of His general directive regarding His servants (9:14; cf. Luke 10:7-8), and then by His specific apostolic call to Paul (Acts 9:1ff). Paul knew better than anyone that he had been chosen and commissioned by the Lord; he knew his rights as Jesus' servant in the gospel, and yet he willingly set them aside in Corinth in order to avoid causing a hindrance to the gospel.

It was important to Paul that the Corinthians understand his motivation in refusing to require their support during his time of ministry among them. He had done so for their sake – more precisely, for the sake of their *faith* – and not out of personal or even altruistic concerns. And his motive remained unchanged. Doubtless some at Corinth would interpret his defense as a cynical, self-serving attempt to guilt them into supplying the support they'd previously withheld from him. Paul anticipated this reaction and intercepted it by declaring that this was not at all his motivation (9:15a); indeed, even if the Corinthians *wanted* to support him he would not permit them to do so. And not because he was a martyr or trying to punish them; Paul recognized that receiving support from the Corinthians would only reinforce the false perception of him held by some among them (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:7-13), thus making him even more of a stumbling block to those individuals and perhaps other brethren as well, and he was unwilling to allow that.

These observations are important because they provide the necessary framework for interpreting Paul's statement that he preferred death over permitting any man to make his boast an empty one (9:15b). Without them, it's easy to conclude that Paul's refusal to accept support from the Corinthians was a matter of his own pride – that he regarded his self-support as a badge of honor which distinguished him from others of Jesus' servants and no one was going to deprive him of it. But this wasn't at all what Paul meant, as his subsequent explanation shows (9:16-18).

Here Paul finally made explicit what he's implied all along, namely that his apostolic labors were a matter of compulsion (9:16): *He was compelled to preach the gospel* – first because the Lord Jesus Himself had set him apart and called him to it, but also because of the burden of his own heart. Paul had experienced the forgiveness, cleansing and life of the new creation in Jesus Christ and he longed for all men to share in it. Paul saw himself as a man under compulsion, but his point wasn't that he was being forced to preach against his will, but that this compulsion afforded him no boast. He couldn't take credit or praise for preaching the gospel, for he was only doing what the Lord called him to do; he was only fulfilling his commission. This understanding is critical to interpreting verse 17:

- When a man willfully enters upon a vocation, he does so expecting to receive some sort of reward from his labors. He is serving at his *own* behest; he has, as it were, called himself into service, which means that he serves with a sense of his own personal concerns and interests.

- But Paul's calling and vocation were imposed upon him. He didn't choose to be Christ's apostle; the Lord chose and appointed him (Acts 9:1ff). So Paul didn't decide to preach, he was directed to do so by the One he'd come to recognize as Yahweh's promised Messiah. He was under divine orders to bring the gospel of the kingdom to the Jewish people and the Gentile nations. The God of Israel had entrusted him with the stewardship of the "good news" that the deliverance, renewal and everlasting kingdom He'd been promising for millennia had now been realized in His Servant.

God had chosen to reveal to Paul the mystery which had been hidden for ages and generations, and he was now to carry the revelation of that mystery to the sons of men (Ephesians 3:1-12). Paul's stewardship was a glorious privilege as well as a high calling, and he considered his "reward" accordingly: Paul was entitled to *material support* in his labors, but such support had nothing to do with his *reward* for his work. Paul labored for the sake of the gospel and he regarded the fruit of those labors to be his reward, which was people coming to faith in Jesus. *Thus Paul saw material support as merely serving his reward, not as the reward itself.*

- Paul's reward was seeing men presented complete in Christ; if the saints' support helped him – *and them* – toward that goal, he rejoiced and praised God for it (cf. 2 Corinthians 8-9; Philippians 4:15-19; Colossians 1:24-29).
- But because of how Paul conceived his reward, he was just as happy foregoing support and providing for his own needs if *that* helped advance his work and the goal he had in it.

For Paul, the presence or absence of material support was relevant only to the extent that either scenario contributed to the fruitfulness of his labors and so to his own reward in them: If being supported freed him up so as to make his work more fruitful, he rejoiced in it; if it created an obstacle or stumbling block, he gladly refused it. Paul's reward consisted in the success of the gospel, and this is why he could say that he was rewarded in being able to offer the gospel without charge (9:18). Jesus called him to take the good news of His triumph and kingdom to all people, and thus Paul wasn't going to let his ministry be limited by men's ability – or willingness – to meet his expenses. Time and space might limit him, but financial concerns wouldn't; rich or poor, generous or sparing, Paul was committed to preach the gospel to all men, with an eye not to his material support, but with the goal of receiving an abundant reward in a rich harvest of faith.

- d. As with the matter of food sacrificed to idols, the Corinthians were looking narrowly at the issue of Paul's support. For them, it was a question of right and wrong and upholding one's "rights." But Paul viewed the question of his support as he did every issue of life: *One's relation to any particular issue is determined by the overarching obligation of conformity to the truth as it is in Jesus Christ.* All things must be perceived and employed in the cause of Christ and His gospel; faith and edification, not personal rights, governed Paul's thoughts and actions.

Thus, though he was “*free from all men,*” Paul made himself “*a slave to all, that he might win the more*” (9:19). Paul was free from all men in the sense that he wasn’t constrained by or obligated to their sensibilities and convictions. He knew no man could judge him and he didn’t subject himself to their judgment. But Paul recognized One who judges him and to whom he was obligated (cf. 9:16, 4:1-4). The love of Christ constrained Paul to loving, faithful servanthood, and this meant becoming the servant of all men for the sake of Christ’s accomplishment and glory as the source and substance of God’s new creation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

Like the preceding verses, this passage (9:19-22) has often been misconstrued and misapplied in the Christian community. Not infrequently it has been used as biblical warrant for effectively (if not intentionally) “rounding the corners” of gospel truth for the sake of making it agreeable to men of various perspectives and persuasions. Reacting against this sort of compromise, others have rendered themselves equally guilty of violating Paul’s words. They’ve done so by minimizing or glossing over the yieldedness which Paul insisted upon as the paradigm for gospel witness in the Church and in the world.

Paul wasn’t authorizing any compromise of the truth; he wasn’t calling for or approving any sort or degree of accommodation in the truth, but the accommodation of the truth to individual men.

- Paul’s goal was the fruit of authentic faith in those alienated from God. But faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ – that is, through the truth of the gospel made living and compelling by the Holy Spirit (Romans 10:17). Paul’s goal depended upon the truth as it is in Jesus Christ; therefore, he recognized that any compromise of the gospel – whether by alteration, omission, or addendum – amounted to him shooting himself in the foot; all such compromise only undermined his labors.
- The proclamation of the truth of Jesus Christ was the substance of Paul’s ministry, but his goal was that his hearers would be joined to Him and perfected in Him. Paul’s goal wasn’t agreement with the truthfulness of gospel content, but men’s participation in the new creation in Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17-20; Colossians 1:28-29). *This depends upon truthful words and ideas being discerned and internalized as the word of truth as it is in Christ Jesus.* Gospel truths have their proper effect when the Spirit renders them “spirit and life” in the mind and heart of the hearer, and this demands a “meeting of the minds” between the hearer and the preacher.

In spite of how men might interpret his words, Paul wasn’t in any way allowing or approving compromise, but he was insisting upon accommodation. The goal and fruitfulness of the gospel renounce the former while demanding the latter. It was in terms of this rightful accommodation that Paul spoke of himself as the slave of all men, and in verses 20-22 he illustrated this “slavery” by means of four examples, all of which highlight what it means to “become all things to all men.”

The first three are closely related in that they deal with Jew-Gentile distinctions. Elsewhere Paul addressed at length the challenges faced by church bodies comprised of Jewish and Gentile believers, but this wasn't his concern in the present passage. *Here he was speaking with regard to the unique challenges in testifying to Jesus among Jews and non-Jews.*

- 1) Paul first insisted that he became as a Jew to the Jews (9:20a). This is a peculiar statement because Paul *was* a Jew; in what sense, then, did he have to become *like* a Jew? The answer lies in Paul's understanding of salvation-historical fulfillment: He recognized that, in Christ Jesus, there is no such thing as "Jew" or "Gentile"; there is only the one "new man" in Him (Ephesians 2:11-22; cf. Galatians 3:26-29). Paul hadn't renounced his Jewishness, but, as a member of the "Israel of God," he now transcended his Jewish identity as fulfillment transcends promise. Paul's Jewishness – as that of all believing Jews – had been *christified*, and that meant he was no longer bound by Jewish definitions or prescriptions.
- 2) Jewishness has been christified because Israel's identity and existence have been fulfilled in Christ Jesus, Yahweh's True Israel. But this also means that the Law of Moses – the covenant by which Israel was identified, defined and ordered as the Abrahamic nation – has been christified. Echoing his Lord, Paul everywhere insisted that Jesus of Nazareth, as Israel's promised Messiah, didn't abrogate the Law, but fulfilled it (Matthew 5:17). He is the true Abrahamic seed (Galatians 3:16): Yahweh's true Son, Servant, Disciple and Witness through whom all the families of the earth are blessed (ref. again Galatians 3).

Jesus has fulfilled the Mosaic Law, but unbelieving Jews don't understand or acknowledge this. As it is with their Jewish identity and practice, so it is with their relation to the covenant Law which prescribed their identity and practice: *The veil remains unlifted, still laying heavy over their hearts and minds* (2 Corinthians 3:7-17). The Jews to whom Paul brought the gospel continued to look at life through the lens of Torah; they perceived and processed his words through that ethnic, sociological and theological grid. Thus communicating the truth to Jews – rather than merely uttering truthful words – depended upon Paul "entering their world" and speaking their language (9:20b). *Faith is grounded in truth, but truth is a matter of meaning and meaning is communicated from a meeting of the minds.*

Paul had been set free in Christ, but his Jewish countrymen remained in the bonds of darkness and unbelief. He longed for and sought their freedom, but in order to liberate them he had to go to them in the prison house where they were chained. He had to meet them where they were; he had to come as a Jew to Jews whose consciences were yet governed by Torah. *Without denying his freedom in Christ – which he could not do without denying the gospel, Paul had to set aside his rights under that freedom for the sake of freedom coming to his fellow Israelites.*

- 3) Paul's third example pertains to the other side of the Jew-Gentile dynamic. Becoming all things to all men meant approaching his countrymen as a Jew, but it also meant approaching Gentiles as a Gentile: It meant coming to those "*without law as one without law*" (9:21). This qualification, too, demands careful consideration or Paul's point will be missed.

The first thing to recognize is that Paul was not indicting the Gentiles as "lawless" in the moral/ethical sense. But neither was he saying that he set aside all lawful restraint in seeking to witness to them. (Almost certainly some of the Jewish believers at Corinth – as in other congregations – chafed at Paul's freedom from the Law and its demands, even as the "strong" at Corinth found fault with him for not exercising his freedom as he ought.) Paul was using the term "law" to refer to the demands of the Law of Moses, *and his expression was simply affirming the obvious fact that Gentiles have no relation to the covenant by which Israel was defined and related to God*. For the most part they don't know its precepts and prescriptions, and to the extent that they do, they are not bound by them.

The Jews viewed all spiritual truth through the lens of the Law of Moses, and Paul interacted with them accordingly. But the Gentiles to whom Paul witnessed have no such grid and so it would have been foolish and profitless for him to interact with them as he did the Jews. Whatever their ethnicity, local culture and religious conviction, the Gentiles are "outside the law" and Paul came to them in that way (cf. Acts 13:14ff and 17:16ff).

These three examples importantly show that Paul was able to come to men as one "under the Law" or "outside the Law." But what appears at first glance to be duplicity on Paul's part actually highlights a critical component of his understanding of Christ and His relationship to the preceding salvation history. Paul recognized that Jesus had fulfilled the Law of Moses – not as a matter of legal conformity, but salvation-historical fulfillment: *The Law of Moses was a pedagogue and prophet, not a collection of laws and commandments*.

The Law was the covenant by which God's previous covenant with Abraham was upheld and administered at the level of his national "seed" (cf. Genesis 15:1-21 (esp. vv. 13-16) with Exodus 3:1-17). The Law specified and prescribed Israel's Abrahamic identity and calling with respect to God and the world and so shone a spotlight on the nation's failure to be "Israel": *The Mosaic Covenant taught Israel who it was as the Abrahamic people, and consequently revealed the nature and import of its failure and so also the necessity of a new "Israel" in order for the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant to be fulfilled*. The Law served God's covenant with Abraham by ordering and overseeing the salvation history centered in Israel: the historical process of the Israelite kingdom which God ordained to prepare for the Seed to whom the Abrahamic promise ultimately referred. This is the sense in which the law was both *prophet* (Matthew 11:11-15) and *pedagogue* (Galatians 3:15-29); this is the sense in which Jesus *fulfilled* the Law.

Paul understood these things and this is why he treated the Law of Moses as indifferent. *Just as food sacrificed to idols is to be perceived and employed in terms of the gospel and its work, so it is with the Law.* The gospel proclaims the good news that all things have been “christified” in Jesus Christ; therefore, what matters is the fruitfulness of Christ’s accomplishment realized in the production and perfection of faith. God’s goal – and so Paul’s goal – is the summing up of everything in Christ; everything, then, is to be considered in terms of that goal. ***In the time of preparation, the Law pointed to Christ as a forward-looking prophet; now in the age of fulfillment, it points to Him as a backward-looking witness.*** Paul recognized that the Law of Moses (as the entire salvation history recorded in the Scriptures) was intended by God to witness to His purpose and promise now fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The Law served the cause of the gospel and that is precisely how Paul utilized it, whether in relation to Jews or Gentiles.

These considerations illumine Paul’s assertion that he wasn’t under the Law. This insistence provoked some – Christians and Jews alike – to charge Paul with “antinomianism” (cf. Galatians with Acts 21:27-28, 25:1-8). As they did with Jesus Himself, many heard in Paul’s gospel of the Law’s *fulfillment* in Christ the assertion of its *abrogation* and therefore a tacit promotion of “lawlessness.” But fulfillment doesn’t mean abolition; it means realization.

Indeed, now being in Christ, Paul, the impeccable Jew, was for the first time properly related to God’s law (that is, *torah* as God’s revelation of Himself and His purposes for His creation as centered in Jesus Christ). ***Paul was living according to the truth of the Law precisely because he was living according to the truth of the One whom the Law served as prophet and pedagogue*** (ref. Galatians 4:21-31). The very fact that Paul was bound to the “torah” that is Christ Himself (9:21b) proved that he was bound – now in truth – to Yahweh’s “torah.”

- 4) Paul’s fourth example reveals the point of the previous three by returning to the contextual concern of the obligation of the mature to the immature: Punctuating his previous instruction in chapter eight, Paul declared that he “*became weak to the weak*” (9:22). Again, Paul wasn’t saying that he renounced his mature understanding and liberty for the sake of the “weak”; he was simply affirming that he interacted with less mature believers on their own terms, just as he did with unbelieving Jews and Gentiles. If his weaker brother’s conscience was offended by certain foods, Paul set aside his right (but not his mature conviction) to eat them.

Whether Jew or Gentile unbeliever or weak or strong brother in Christ, Paul came to each individual person sensitive to his conscience and convictions. He didn’t compromise or disclaim his own convictions; *indeed he upheld them by serving the faith of the other.* For Paul’s convictions were bound up in the gospel of Christ and he oriented himself toward all men so as to make that gospel coherent and compelling. Paul recognized that all things have their truth in Christ and so all things are properly viewed and utilized when they serve His gospel (9:22b-23).