

FIRST CORINTHIANS 9:7–12, 19–23. (EHV)

What soldier ever serves at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat some of its fruit? Or who takes care of a flock and does not drink milk from the flock? Am I saying this just from a human point of view? Doesn't the law also say this? Yes, it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out grain" [Deut. 25:4]. Is God really concerned about oxen, or does he say this entirely for our sake? Yes, it was written for our sake, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher ought to thresh in hope of getting a share. If we sowed spiritual seed for your good, is it too much if we reap material benefits from you? If others have some right to make this claim on you, don't we even more? But we did not use this right. Instead, we endure everything so as not to cause any hindrance for the gospel of Christ. ... In fact, although I am free from all, I enslaved myself to all so that I might gain many more. To the Jews, I became like a Jew so that I might gain Jews. To those who are under the law, I became like a person under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those who are under the law. To those who are without the law, I became like a person without the law (though I am not without God's law but am within the law of Christ) so that I might gain those who are without the law. To the weak, I became weak so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least some. And I do everything for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in it along with others.

Perhaps you have heard this quote or a variant of it: "Just because you have the right to do something doesn't mean it's the right thing to do."

Not too long ago, my wife and I were watching a documentary. One of the story lines in the documentary was a man who, together with his wife, had adopted a cute little boy from Russia. But not long after they brought him back to America, he absentmindedly brought his adoptive son to work with him and left him in the vehicle instead of taking him to daycare, and tragically, the boy suffocated to death in the vehicle. A terrible tragedy. But while your instinct might be to point the finger at that man and say what a horrible father he was, every last shred of evidence pointed to this being a freak accident that maybe couldn't have happened to anybody, but could have happened to a lot more people than you might think. The man was the definition of devastation and had to be put on suicide watch at one point.

Then he was put on trial for involuntary manslaughter. Like I said, every shred of evidence pointed to the death being completely unintentional, and the man almost couldn't even give testimony without losing himself emotionally. At one point the judge had a private conference with the prosecution and the defense and told them frankly, "I am not putting this man in jail." Whether you agree with him or not, he was putting that saying into practice: "Just because you have the right to do something doesn't mean it's the right thing to do." He had every right to sentence the man to serious jail time. He had killed his son through criminal negligence—criminal, accidental negligence, but criminal nonetheless. But the judge realized that the man had already gone through a hundred lifetime imprisonments psychologically and emotionally. Adding an actual prison sentence to his suffering would itself be criminal. There was a difference between the right he had as a judge, and the use of that right.

The apostle Paul makes the same point to us Christians this morning. As Christians, those on the side of the Lord of the universe, we have many rights. But just because you have the right to do something doesn't mean it's the right thing to do. There is a difference between having a right and the use of that right.

Paul is writing to the Christian congregation in Corinth in modern day Greece. He had founded that congregation during his second missionary journey. He is now in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, and he wrote this letter from there around 54 AD. He wrote the letter in response to a report he received about divisions and problems that had arisen in the Corinthian congregation. Some in the congregation were claiming loyalty to Peter as opposed to Paul, because they had apparently met Peter and were impressed by him and now thought of him as Christ's chief spokesman, the final word on Christianity, and a more legitimate apostle than the apostle Paul.

So in Chapter 9 Paul defends his apostleship and the way he carried out his apostolic ministry. Perhaps there were some in the congregation who were saying that a real apostle would be getting paid as an apostle, like Peter apparently was. Paul, on the other hand, worked as a tentmaker to bring in income. He did not draw any income from the congregations he founded.

So Paul says that the fact that he doesn't take any payment for his work doesn't mean he doesn't have the right to it. "What soldier serves at his own expense?" None, of course. They get paid by the government they are serving. "Who plants a vineyard and does not eat some of its fruit?" No one, of course. "Or who takes care of a flock and does not drink milk from the flock?" Today we might say, "Who cares for a herd of dairy cows and doesn't drink or use any of their milk himself?" The answer is the same: No one.

He continues: "Am I saying this just from a human point of view? Doesn't the law also say this? Yes, it is written in the Law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out grain' [Deut. 25:4]." In other words, you shouldn't prevent an ox from eating grain as he is treading it out. But "is God really concerned about oxen, or does he say this entirely for our sake? Yes, it was written for our sake, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher ought to thresh in hope of getting a share."

What is Paul's point? "If we sowed spiritual seed for your good, is it too much if we reap material benefits from you? If others have some right to make this claim on you, don't we even more?" Paul's point is that, as an apostle, as a public minister of the gospel, he certainly did have a right to be paid and supported as an apostle and public minister of the gospel, like other apostles no doubt were. As someone sharing good things, the best things, with others, he had a right to some of their good things in return.

"But," he says, "we did not use this right. Instead, we endure everything so as not to cause any hindrance for the gospel of Christ." Some of the other apostles, perhaps all of the other apostles, worked in and among established Christian congregations. But Paul was a missionary to the Gentiles, exposing many people to the gospel of Jesus for the first time. People are used to services being rendered for money, so Paul wanted to emphasize the free saving grace of God in Jesus Christ at the heart of his message by also making his services free, so that they would see that Paul was sincere and that this message was different from all other religious messages. There's a difference between having a right and making use of that right.

Paul later goes on to talk about other ways he put this principle into practice: “In fact, although I am free from all, I enslaved myself to all so that I might gain many more. To the Jews, I became like a Jew so that I might gain Jews. To those who are under the law, I became like a person under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those who are under the law.” As one example of this, he had his protégé Timothy circumcised, even though he didn’t have to be, since Christ had fulfilled the ceremonial law, so that he and Timothy could have greater, unhindered access among the Jews with the gospel. He doubtless also followed all the kosher food laws when he was around them.

But “to those who are without the law, I became like a person without the law (though I am not without God’s law but am within the law of Christ) so that I might gain those who are without the law.” If he was in the company of Gentiles, he didn’t observe the Old Testament regulations about clean and unclean, for instance, so that he could have freer access among the Gentiles with the gospel.

“To the weak, I became weak so that I might gain the weak.” In the previous chapter he talked about meat from animals that had been sacrificed to idols. Since idols are nothing, Christians had every right to eat that meat. But some people, especially people who had formerly worshipped those idols, couldn’t separate the meat from the idol worship it had been used for. They couldn’t eat the meat without feeling like they were participating in idol worship again. So around such people, Paul would not make use of his right to eat such meat.

“I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least some. And I do everything for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in it along with others.”

All of this should make us think about the difference between having rights and using those rights.

There are some cases where our not making use of our rights is explicitly commanded by God. Jesus once had a discussion with Peter in which he talked about how we are the sons of the ultimate ruler, the ultimate government leader. As such, we are above all earthly law and exempt from all earthly law. But he does not want that exemption to be a stench in the nostrils of those within the divine institution of government. So he commands that, for instance, if we owe taxes, we pay taxes, and that we obey all other governmental laws where we can do so without sinning against God.

Another example would be in marriage. The Bible says that the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, and that wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Yet God does not want husbands to make full and absolute use of that right, but to serve their wives and families in selfless love, as Christ did for the Church.

But there are other cases, like Paul not taking pay from the congregations he founded, where not making use of a right is not explicitly spelled out in Scripture, but is still a matter of Christian wisdom and love. I have a right to alcoholic beverages in moderation, but if making use of that right is going to cause someone who struggles with the abuse of alcohol to sin, I should be willing to forfeit that right.

I have heard of churches where they don’t use the chanting parts of our liturgy, even though they have every right to, because they have a bunch of former Catholic members who

can't help but associate chanting with the work-righteousness that was taught and hammered into them in their Catholic church.

You might have a right to sue your neighbor in this or that case. But will that redound to the good of the community and, more importantly, to the good reputation of the Christian faith and the gospel that you represent? In some cases, yes, and in some cases, no.

These are just a few examples to lead us to ask: How are we representing the gospel? How are we representing the One who had every right to everything, but forfeited the use of all of it for us, even to the point of death, so that we might share in all of his good things at no cost? Are there places where forfeiting certain rights that the Bible doesn't command could make the gospel and Christianity more attractive to others? Where forfeiting certain rights would help us to share in the gospel along with others?

God grant us the ability to know the difference between having a right and making use of that right, and the wisdom to put that knowledge into practice for the sake of the gospel of Jesus our Savior.