

# The Open Hand: Paul's Secret to Missional Living

## 1 Corinthians 9:1-14

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Steve DeWitt

We are studying 1 Corinthians, and for the past few weeks, the subject of Christian liberty. The issue at hand in Corinth was whether a Christian could eat meat that previously was offered to an idol. I have said repeatedly that it's great that we can talk about this idol meat issue because it's not an issue for us. However, it does create a paradigm for our contemporary liberty issues. Of course, as I have had meals with our church people, they will make a face and say, *Is this idol meat?*

Last time we were challenged by Paul's example in which he said, *We endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.* (1 Corinthians 9:12) This is in the context of chapters 9-11 which deals with these matters of Christian liberty. Paul's big point in chapter 8 was that those with liberty (defined as the strong conscience) should be willing to defer or limit their liberty expressions for the sake of the conscience of the weak. The weak (those whose consciences don't allow freedom) should not judge the strong for their freedom. They also should try to strengthen their conscience and we talked about how to do that. Paul's statement, *I'll endure anything for the sake of the gospel*, shows the real issue. It isn't about idol meat but the upside down priority list among the Christians in the church. In light of the big picture of God's redemption of mankind through the person and work of Christ, idol meat isn't important. Making little things big things is spiritual pettiness.

The antidote to pettiness is passion. Passion for God and passion for the Great Commission puts liberty issues in their proper place. When churches and Christians go to war about these issues, what is really going on is that the glory of Christ and His gospel is demeaned, which is precisely why Satan loves to get Christians riled up about idol meat issues. He gets a kick out of it. *They're obsessing about idol meat! And they call themselves followers of Jesus! Jesus, you died for these people?*

We focused on the main point in verse 12 last time; today let's go back to verses 1-11 and see how Paul got there. First, two quick observations. Paul makes his points here by asking questions. There are 14 questions in 10 verses. You can make a point by asking a question, can't you?

Secondly, Paul's purpose is to give the strong of chapter 8 a living, breathing example of denying freedoms for the sake of the gospel. His own biography and testimony concludes this whole argument in 11:1 where he says, *Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*

Paul begins by establishing his rights and privileges; specifically three: his position as an Apostle, his freedom as an Apostle, and his right to financial support from the churches.

### Paul's List of Personal Rights

#### His Position (Verses 1-2)

*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.*

Am I not an Apostle? Yes he was. With that position came unique privileges in the church. The Apostles are called foundation stones of the church in Ephesians 2. They set doctrinal direction and spoke authoritatively in a church that did not have the New Testament Scriptures. The test of Apostleship was seeing the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22, 2:32, 3:15, 4:33).

*Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?* He's referring there to his experience on the road to Damascus where Christ appeared to him and commissioned him as an Apostle to the Gentiles. Further, the Corinthians of all people should acknowledge his Apostleship as they owe their own faith to Paul who came and ministered among them. They are proof of God's hand on Paul and God's work through him.

Why does he begin with his position? Is Paul on a power kick? Not at all. He begins with his Apostleship for the same reason Jesus began with his position as the Son of Man in Mark 10:45, *For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" If Christ in his exalted position as the Son of Man/Son of God had a mindset of service, then what should that mean for average Joe Christians like you and me?

If the Apostle Paul, with all the rights of an Apostle, is denying his rights and freedoms for the sake of the gospel, then average Joe Christians like the Corinthians and the Bethelonians most certainly should as well.

### **His freedom in areas of Christian Liberty (Verse 1)**

*Am I not free?*

As an Apostle and as one set free from the legalism of his Jewish heritage, Paul makes it clear that in areas of Christian liberty, his personal conscience is strong and free. He's not the weak who don't participate in liberty areas because their conscience isn't free. His is free.

### **His right to Financial Support (Verses 4-14)**

*This is my defense to those who would examine me.* (Verse 3)

Paul was under fire. We saw it in chapter 4. People in the church were disparaging him. Some were questioning his Apostleship. One reason for this was that Paul did not do what the other Apostles and teachers did and what was common for secular teachers in Corinth – Paul did not accept financial support. He did manual labor to support himself.

We see this in Acts 18:1-3, *After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade.*

You may have heard the phrase "tentmaker." It's used now for someone who works a job to meet their needs but their main focus is ministry. This is common in missions work. Pastor Gary's daughter and son-in-law are doing tentmaking ministry in China.

Paul made tents. It was manual labor. The Greeks despised manual labor. It was beneath them and it was certainly beneath anyone who was a teacher or orator. The Corinthians questioned, *How can this guy be an Apostle if he's making tents?* This would be a little like

Paul showing up here. He refuses the support we would offer for him to serve here and instead gets a job at the McDonald's across the street. He's the guy who takes your money at the window. In our culture, that would seem odd. You might wonder if he is who he claims to be. In Corinth, Paul worked at Tents R US. Some were saying, "He's no Apostle."

Paul's answer is to establish a theology of why those who minister the gospel have the right to financial support. By doing this, he is establishing that he has the right to it. Why? So his denial of financial support can be an example to them of self-denial of liberty freedoms for the sake of the gospel.

*Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? (Verses 4-6)*

The word "right" is repeated three times in these three questions. The answer to each is, yes. Does he have a right to food and drink? Yes. Does he have the right to enough support so he could travel with a believing wife? Yes. We know from chapter 7 that Paul is not married. He may have been widowed. We don't know. He is speaking theoretically, but in doing so he gives us an interesting insight into the other church leaders. He says that the Apostles, the brothers of Jesus, and Peter all did their itinerant ministry and brought their wives with them at the expense of the churches.

He mentions the brothers of Jesus. Did you know Jesus had brothers? They are really half-brothers as Jesus was virgin born, not of the seed of Joseph. I wonder how many of us know the names of Jesus' brothers? Here's a chance to learn them: James (who wrote the book of James), Joseph, Simon, and Judas (not the Judas you are thinking of, but the one who wrote what we call Jude) (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). Despite what some people think, Mary is not the eternal virgin as she gave birth to at least four sons and two daughters. The picture of the Apostles and their wives has unsettled me a bit this week. I guess it's because I've never seen a depiction of the Apostles with wives; Da Vinci's Last Supper, for example. It's kind of fun to think about. What were their wives like? Did Peter and John's wives get along? Did they get together for lunch? Here's what we can know about all the Apostles' wives, all of them played the piano and led children's ministries.

Paul says, don't we have the right to support from the churches for food and family like all the other Apostles? Of course. Apparently this money thing was a point of contention because he elaborates as to why he and all ministers of the gospel should be supported by God's people.

### **The Pattern of Normal Life**

*Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk...If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? (Verses 7, 11)*

He gives three examples: a soldier, a farmer, and a shepherd. Each of them financially profit from what they are doing. The soldier gets the spoils of war. The farmer eats food from his field. The shepherd drinks milk from the flock he cares for. The pattern of normal life applies to spiritual farming and shepherding. *If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? This is normal everywhere else, why not for the gospel minister as well?*

## The Teaching of Scripture

*Do I say these things 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 treads out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. (Verses 8-10)*

The Old Testament laid down the rule that treading ox had the right to the grain his treading was producing (Deuteronomy 25:4). Also known as thrashing, the oxen would walk over grain stalks and pound out the grain. To muzzle the ox was to drive him to starvation even as he produces food. Don't do it, Deuteronomy says. God was concerned for the animals, but Paul says there is a deeper truth. The minister has the right to what his labors are producing.

## The Teaching of Jesus

*In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. (1 Corinthians 9:14)*

Where did Jesus say that? In Luke 10, Jesus sent 72 men out into Galilee in groups of two. He told them not to take along money but to expect support from those to whom they minister. Here's the verse, *the laborer deserves his wages* (Luke 10:7). Paul uses the same reference and argument in 1 Timothy 5:18. Other passages on this are: Matthew 10:9-10, 1 Thessalonians 2:6-7, 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9. Our expository series have taught on this in the past; here's one more passage teaching one aspect of the body life of the church, the financial support of those who minister the Word.

This is why we do it. It's also an opportunity for me to speak on the behalf of the staff and say thank you for being a biblical church in this regard and your commitment to taking care of us. Thank you for all you do.

Here's the irony and the point. After taking all these verses to show that he has a right to financial support, he says in verse 12, But you know what? I don't exercise this right. Why? I don't want anything to get in the way of the gospel. *We endure anything! As an Apostle, I am totally entitled to the full expression of Christian liberty, food and drink, financial support like all the others.*

However, I set that right aside because there is something more important – the gospel of Christ going forth for the salvation of sinners from their sins unto forgiveness, justification, and eternal life. I endure anything; give up anything; for the gospel! Whatever it takes. Paul held his rights and freedoms with an open hand.

Let me tell you what I mean by that. We all have things we hold with an open hand and things we hold with a closed hand. There's a big difference between the two. To hold something with an open hand is to have it in your possession, to have rights to it, but not to protect it or view it as an entitlement. To hold something with a closed hand is to clench it and refuse to let it go.

Open hand. Closed hand. I endure anything for the gospel. For Paul, his rights were things he held with an open hand. If it is best for the kingdom of God, I'll give them up. Go without. Make tents. Not have a wife along. Not receive support. Open Hand. Anything for the Kingdom.

## The Closed Hand

With this picture of the open and closed hand, what do you have in each? Here are some things that are all too often in the closed hand of a Christian.

### Time

It's *my* time. Mine. OK. Guess what serving in the Great Commission requires of God's people? Time. Often it's inconvenient time. So, what do you do when serving Jesus requires time that you mentally set aside for some overtime at work, relaxation, playing some game, watching other people play a game, or whatever?

It's amazing to me how there are some Bethelonians who give lots of time to serving Jesus. They're around a lot. Their name pops up a lot. They are serving and giving time. Other Bethelonians are too busy for anything. Their job, hobbies, families, kids' activities, travel and vacations, there's just no time! Even as I suggest that we all have the same amount of time and how we use it says where our priorities are, some of you are clenching your closed hand. "Don't threaten my right to my time! I would but I am too busy, too much going on."

### Envisioned ideal life and future

I think if we were honest about the typical American Christian, most want enough Christianity to be assured of heaven but not too much to interfere with their real pursuits, career advancement, nice moral children who get good grades, comfortable living, and a nice comfortable retirement. So here's what happens. God's goal is to conform us to the image of Christ. How does He get us there? Trials. Suffering. Unexpected turns in the road. When the turn is contrary to the envisioned ideal life and future, great conflict ensues.

My parents are presently ministering to a Christian family in turmoil. The problem? One of their adult children has made the grave error of deciding to go into foreign missions. How dare she! Her mom is infuriated. Why? It doesn't fit the mom's plan. *My daughter serving Jesus away from me on the mission field is not what I envisioned.* Her fist is so closed on her dreams that she's bitter towards God. *Why can't my daughter marry a nice young man, settle down in a home a few streets over from us?* Here's why: people are dying and going to hell every day all over the world and Jesus said, Go. Closed hand.

### Money, health, control and other idols

There are few things we hold with a tighter fist than money. Or what we call *our* money. Yet there is no better indication of someone's heart than holding their money with an open hand and generosity for kingdom work. How closed is your hand on money? Same with health and comfort; an easy life. You can know how tightly you hold them when they are threatened to be taken away. We want to be in control. We want to self-manage everything.

This is how Paul's example of missional, Christ-focused living is so helpful. He said it this way in Philippians 1:21, *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.* He held his whole life with an open hand. Was Paul a fool or did he realize something we often don't? In the words of Jim Elliot, *He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.* It only seems like we can hold on to anything. What do we really control? Nothing.

God is glorified when we trust Him enough to hold everything with an open hand. *God, you can take these from me because I believe what you will do with them is better. I want what*

*you want, therefore all I have is yours. I have trusted you with my eternity; I can offer everything else to you as well.*

That's living with an open hand. Do you? You will likely find out because life reveals what we hold with an open and a closed hand. God is glorified when we hold everything to Him with an open hand.

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