

"MINISTRY FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL"

1CORINTHIANS 9:1-27

INTRODUCTION:

There are a number of things that take place in this chapter. First is the continuing theme of Christian liberty. Secondly, is Paul's desire to talk to the Corinthians about his Apostleship? And thirdly, is Paul's personal outline for ministry.

Each of these topics is important because they help us to understand how a sovereign God works in the daily, practical life of man. There is nothing that God is doing in the life of Paul that He couldn't do in your life or mine. The real liberty that we experience is the position that we have in Christ to be used of Almighty God to implement and fulfill His divine plan.

I. **MINISTRY IS A PRIVILEGE NOT A BURDEN!** (1Cor 9:1-14)

At first sight this chapter seems quite disconnected from what goes before but in fact it is not. The whole point lies in this--the Corinthians who considered themselves mature Christians have been claiming that they are in such a privileged position that they are free to eat meat offered to idols if they like. Their Christian freedom gives them--as they think--a special position in which they could do things which might not be permissible to lesser men. Paul's way of answering that argument is to set forth the many privileges which he himself had a perfect right to claim, but which he did not claim in case they should turn out to be stumbling-blocks to others and hindrances to the effectiveness of the gospel.

[1] **First, he claims to be an apostle**, which immediately set him in a very special position. He uses **two arguments** to prove the reality of his apostleship.

(1) **He has seen the Lord**. Over and over again the Book of Acts makes it clear that the supreme test of an apostle is that he is a witness of the Resurrection. (Ac 1:22; Ac 2:32; Ac 3:15; Ac 4:33). This is of intense importance.

(2) **Faith, in the New Testament**, is very seldom founded on ones allegiance to a creed; it is almost always trust in a person.

(3) Paul does not say, "I know what I have believed." He says, "I know whom I have believed." (2Tim 1:12).

When Jesus called his disciples, he did not say to them, "I have a philosophy which I would like you to examine," or, "I have an ethical system which I would like you to consider," or, "I offer you a statement of belief which I would like you to discuss." He said, "Follow me." All Christianity begins with this personal relationship with Jesus Christ. To be a Christian is to know him personally. As Carlyle once said when a minister was being chosen, "What this Church needs is someone who knows Christ other than at second-hand."

(2) Paul's second claim is that his ministry has been effective. The Corinthians themselves are the proof of that. He calls them his seal. In ancient days the seal was extremely important. When a cargo of grain or dates or the like was being sent off, the last thing done was that the containers were sealed with a seal to show that the consignment was genuinely what it claimed to be. When a will was made it was sealed with seven seals; and it was not legally valid unless it was produced with the seven seals intact. The seal was the guarantee of genuineness. The very fact of the Corinthian Church was the guarantee of Paul's apostleship. The final proof that a man himself knows Christ is that he can bring others to him. It is said that once a young soldier, lying in pain in a hospital, said to Florence Nightingale as she bent over to tend him, "You are Christ to me." The reality of a man's Christianity is best proved by the fact that he helps others to be Christian.

The privilege that Paul might have claimed was support from the Church. Not only could he have claimed such support for himself but also for a wife. In fact the other apostles did receive such support. The Greeks despised manual labour; no free Greek would willingly work with his hands.

Illustration:

Aristotle declared that all men were divided into two classes--the cultured and the hewers of wood and drawers of water who existed solely to perform the menial tasks for the others, and whom it was not only mistaken but actually wrong to seek to raise and educate.

The enemies of Socrates and Plato had in fact taunted them because they took no money for teaching, and had hinted that they did so because their teaching was worth nothing. It is true that every Jewish Rabbi was supposed to teach for nothing and to have a trade whereby he earned his daily bread; but these same Rabbis took very good care to inculcate the teaching that there was no more meritorious deed than to support a Rabbi. If a man wished a comfortable place in heaven he could not better assure himself of it than by supplying all a Rabbi's needs. On every ground Paul could have claimed the privilege of being supported by the Church.

Paul uses ordinary human analogies. No soldier has to provide his own rations. Why should the soldier of Christ have to do so? The man who plants a vineyard shares in the fruits. Why should the man who plants churches not do so? The shepherd of the flock gets his food from the flock. Why should not the Christian pastor do likewise? Even scripture says that the ox who works the threshing machine is not to be muzzled but is to be allowed to eat of the grain (Deut 25:4). As any Rabbi would, Paul allegorizes that instruction and makes it apply to the Christian teacher.

The priest who serves in the Temple receives his share of the offerings. In Greek sacrifice the priest, as we have seen, received the ribs, the ham and the left side of the face. But it is worth while looking at the perquisites of the priests in the Temple at Jerusalem.

THERE WERE FIVE MAIN OFFERINGS.

(1) The Burnt-offering. This alone was burnt entire except the stomach, the entrails and the sinew of the thigh (compare Gen 32:32). But even in this the priests received the hides, and did a flourishing trade with them.

(2) The Sin-offering. In this case only the fat was burned on the altar and the priests received all the flesh.

(3) The Trespass-offering. Again the fat alone was burned and the priests received all the flesh.

(4) The Meat-offering. This consisted of flour and wine and oil. Only a token part was offered on the altar; by far the greater part was the perquisite of the priests.

(5) The Peace-offering. The fat and the entrails were burned on the altar; the priest received the breast and the right shoulder; and the rest was given back to the worshipper.

THE PRIESTS ENJOYED STILL FURTHER PERKS.

(1) They received the first-fruits of the seven kinds--wheat, barley, the vine, the fig-tree, the pomegranate, the olive and honey.

(2) The Terumah (8641). This was the offering of the choicest fruits of every growing thing. The priests had the right to an average of one fiftieth of any crop.

(3) The Tithe. A tithe had to be given of "everything which may be used as food and is cultivated and grows out of the earth." This tithe belonged to the Levites; but the priests received a tithe of the tithe that the Levites received.

(4) The Challah (2471). This was the offering of kneaded dough. If dough was made with wheat, barley, spelt, oats or rye, a private individual had to give to the priests one twenty-fourth part, a public baker one forty-eighth part.

All this is at the back of Paul's refusal to accept even the basic supplies of life from the Church. He refused for two reasons: (i) The priests were a byword. While the ordinary Jewish family ate meat at the most once a week the priests suffered from an occupational disease consequent on eating too much meat. Their privileges, the luxury of their lives, their rapacity were notorious;

Paul knew all about this. He knew how they used religion as a means to grow fat; and he was determined that he would go to the other extreme and take nothing. (ii) The second reason was his sheer independence. It may well be that he carried it too far, because it seems that he hurt the Corinthians by refusing all aid. But Paul was one of those independent souls who would starve rather than be beholden to anyone.

In the last analysis one thing dominated his conduct. He would do nothing that would bring discredit on the gospel or hinder it. Men judge a message by the life and character of the man who brings it; and Paul was determined that his hands would be clean.

He would allow nothing in his life to contradict the message of his lips. Someone once said to a preacher, "I cannot hear what you say for listening to what you are." No one could ever say that to Paul.

II. MINISTRY IS DONE WILLINGLY!

(1Cor 9:15-23)

In this passage there is a kind of outline of Paul's whole conception of his ministry.

(1) He regarded it as a privilege. The one thing he will not do is take money for working for Christ. When a certain famous American professor retired from his chair he made a speech in which he thanked his university for paying him a salary all these years for doing work which he would gladly have paid to do. This does not mean that a man must always work for nothing; there are certain obligations that he must fulfil which he cannot fulfil for nothing; but it does mean that he should never work primarily for money. He should regard his work not as a career of accumulation but as an opportunity of service. He must regard himself as a man whose primary duty is not to help himself but whose privilege is to serve others for God's sake.

(2) He regarded it as a duty. Paul's point of view was that if he had chosen to be a preacher of the gospel he might quite legitimately have demanded payment for his work; but he had not chosen the work; it had chosen him; he could no more stop doing it than he could stop breathing; and there could, therefore, be no question of payment.

Illustration:

Ramon Lull, the great Spanish saint and mystic, tells us how he became a missionary of Christ. He had been living a careless and pleasure-loving life. Then one day, when he was alone, Christ came carrying his Cross and saying to him, "Carry this for me." But he refused. Again, when he was in the silence of a great cathedral, Christ came and asked him to carry his Cross; and again he refused.

In a lonely moment Christ came a third time, and this time, said Ramon Lull, "He took his Cross and with a look he left it lying in my hands. What could I do but take it up and carry it on?" Paul would have said, "What can I do but tell men the good news of Christ?"

(3) Daily, Paul received a great reward. This reward was there even though he would take no payment from man. Sometimes the greatest reward is eternal and not temporal. He had the satisfaction of bringing the gospel freely to all men who would receive it. It is a ways true that the real reward of any task is not its money payment but the satisfaction of a job well done. That is why the biggest thing in life is not to choose the job with the biggest pay but the one in which we will find the greatest satisfaction.

Illustration:

Albert Schweitzer describes the kind of moment which brought him the greatest happiness. Someone suffering intensely is brought into his hospital. He soothes the man by telling him that he will put him to sleep and will operate on him and all will be well. After the operation he sits beside the patient waiting for him to regain consciousness. Slowly he opens his eyes and then whispers in sheer wonderment, "I have no more pain." That was it. There was no material reward there, but a satisfaction as deep as the depths of the heart itself.

To have mended one shattered life, to have restored one wanderer to the right way, to have healed one broken heart, to have brought one soul to Christ is not a thing whose reward can be measured in financial terms, but its joy is beyond all measurement.

(5) Finally, Paul speaks about the method of his ministry, which was to become all things to all men. This is not a case of being hypocritically one thing to one man and another to another. It is a matter in the modern phrase, of being able to get alongside anyone. The man who can never see anything but his own point of view and who never makes any attempt to understand the mind and heart of others, will never make a pastor or an evangelist or even a friend.

Illustrations:

Boswell somewhere speaks of "the art of accommodating oneself to others." That was an art which Dr. Johnson possessed in a supreme degree, for, not only was he a great talker, but he was also a great listener with a supreme ability to get alongside any man.

A friend said of him that he had the art of "leading people to talk on their favourite subjects, and on what they knew best." Once a country clergyman complained to Mrs. Thrale's mother of the dullness of his people. "They talk of runts" (young cows), he said bitterly. "Sir," said the old lady, "Mr. Johnson would have learned to talk of runts." To the countryman he would have become a countryman. Robert Lynd points out how Johnson would discuss the digestive apparatus of a dog with a country parson; how he talked dancing with a dancing master; how he talked on farm management, thatching, the process of malting, the manufacture of gunpowder, the art of tanning. He talks of Johnson's "readiness to throw himself into the interests of other people. He was a man who would have enjoyed discussing the manufacture of spectacles with a spectacle-maker, law with a lawyer, pigs with a pig-breeder, diseases with a doctor, or ships with a ship-builder. He knew that in conversation it is only more blessed to give than to receive."

We can never attain to any kind of evangelism or friendship without speaking the same language and thinking the same thoughts as the other man. Someone once described teaching, medicine and the ministry as "the three patronizing professions." So long as we patronize people and make no effort to understand them, we can never get anywhere with them. Paul, the master missionary, who won more men for Christ than any other man, saw how essential it was to become all things to all men. One of our greatest necessities is to learn the art of getting alongside people; and the trouble so often is that we do not even try.

III. MINISTRY SHOULD PRODUCE FRUIT! (1Cor 9:24-27)

Paul takes another line. He insists to those Corinthians who wanted to take the easy way that no man will ever get anywhere without the sternest self-discipline. Paul was always fascinated by the picture of the athlete.

An athlete must train with intensity if he is to win his contest; and Corinth knew how thrilling contests could be, for at Corinth the Isthmian games, second only to the Olympic games, were held. Furthermore, the athlete undergoes this self-discipline and this training to win a crown of laurel leaves that within days will be a withered chaplet. How much more should the Christian discipline himself to win the crown which is eternal life.

In this passage Paul sets out a kind of brief philosophy of life.

(1) Life is a battle. As William James put it, "If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is not better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it feels like a fight--as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem." As Coleridge had it, "So far from the world being a goddess in petticoats, it is rather a devil in a strait waistcoat." A flabby soldier cannot win battles; a slack trainer cannot win races. We must regard ourselves always as men engaged upon a campaign, as men pressing onwards to a goal.

(2) To win the fight and to be victorious in the race demands discipline. We have to discipline our bodies; it is one of the neglected facts of the spiritual life that very often spiritual depression springs from nothing else than physical unfitness. If a man is going to do his best work in anything he must bring to it a body as fit as he can make it. We have to discipline our minds; it is one of the tragedies of life that men may refuse to think until they become incapable of thinking. We can never solve problems by refusing to see them or by running away from them. We must discipline our souls; we can do so by facing life's sorrows with calm endurance, its temptations with the strength God gives, its disappointments with courage.

(3) We need to know our goal. A distressing thing is the obvious aimlessness of the lives of so many people; they are drifting anywhere instead of going somewhere. Maarten Maartens has a parable. "There was a man once, a satirist. In the natural course of time his friends slew him, and he died. And the people came and stood round about his corpse. 'He treated the whole round world as his football,' they said indignantly, 'and he kicked it.' The dead man opened one eye. 'But,' he said, 'always towards the goal.'" Someone once drew a cartoon showing two men on Mars looking down at the people in this world scurrying here, there and everywhere. One said to the other, "What are they doing?"

The other replied, "They are going." "But," said the first, "where are they going?" "Oh," said the other, "they are not going anywhere; they are just going." And to go just anywhere is the certain way to arrive nowhere.

(4) We need to know the worth of our goal. The great appeal of Jesus was rarely based on penalty and punishment. It was based on the declaration, "Look what you are missing if you do not take my way." The goal is life, and surely it is worth anything to win that.

(5) We cannot save others unless we master ourselves. Freud once said, "Psycho-analysis is learnt first of all on oneself, through the study of one's own personality." The Greeks declared that the first rule of life is, "Man know thyself." Certainly we cannot serve others until we have mastered ourselves; we cannot teach what we do not know; we cannot bring others to Christ until we ourselves have found him.