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1 Corinthians 9:1-27

15th Message

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# THE RIGHT TO YIELD

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

Power has become a common word in our world. We have power wardrobes, power vocabularies, power lunches. Recently, I came across a list of “power table manners.” In fact, one person has developed a seminar to help you eat your way to the top! For \$6,000 you can take in the seminar, but for free this morning I will give some highlights:

- Never tuck your napkin into your collar.
- Never leave a lipstick mark on the rim of a glass.
- Never mash or stir your food.
- Never haggle over the bill.
- Never, ever, hand your plate to the waiter.
- Never read the menu like a Bible. You aren't there to eat, but to do business.
- Never stoop down to retrieve dropped silver.

In fact, that last phrase, never stoop down, summarizes the ideology of those whose quest is for power. Never stoop down for anything. Never stoop to appear weak. Never stoop to help anyone who could never help you. Never stoop to any level that might loosen your grip on your rung of the ladder.

Harrison Ford summed it up well in this line from *Working Girl*: “One lost deal is all it takes to get canned these days. The line of buttons on my phone all have an inch of little pieces of tape piled on, the names of new guys over the names of old guys—good men who aren't at the other end of the line anymore all because of one lost deal. I don't want to get buried under a little piece of tape.”

Most of us can identify with that. We find ourselves either pushing or being pushed. We have confused a passion for excellence with a passion for power. And it is even sadder when the shoving takes place in the church. Although we have changed the titles, the power mentality has remained the same.

The Christians in Corinth would have been right at home with this power mentality. In fact, they had their own power theology. Their idea of an apostle was a man with authority, one who let everyone know that he was in authority. They lorded it over everyone. In their opinion, anyone who did not act in the same way could not possibly be intended to carry responsibility in the church. They saw Christian leadership in terms of being masters, not servants. They criticized Paul because he was not like that; he was too soft, too weak, too willing to deny himself his freedom in Christ for the sake of others.

In fact, a number of people in the church questioned Paul's authority, especially his claim to be an apostle. In their mind if he really were an apostle, he would never allow himself to be so restricted.

Thus, Paul must do two things. He must first defend his apostleship, which he does in verses 1-14; and then he must explain that if he really does have those rights, why he doesn't claim them? So in verses 15-27 he explains his freedom in Christ, especially how he has

deliberately and freely chosen to restrict his freedom for the benefit of others. This, he maintains, is a sign of strength, not weakness.

This is a lengthy passage to cover in one sitting. Though we will not unfold every detail, the principles we will discover from the mind of the apostle Paul form a wonderful model for effective ministry.

## I. An apostle's rights: The support of a ministry (9:1-14)

**Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work 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. (1 Cor 9:1-2 NASB)**

Throughout these verses Paul is speaking about his rights as an apostle, not as a Christian. He unleashes a torrent of rhetorical questions designed to evoke a positive answer: Of course I am; of course I have; of course you are. Paul obviously fits the requirements for a true apostle: he had seen Jesus our Lord. His experience on the road to Damascus was more than a mere vision. He was commissioned by Jesus Christ to preach to the Gentiles. And the sheer existence of the church at Corinth is evidence of the fact of his apostleship. Are you not my work in the Lord? The Christians at Corinth owed to him their very existence as a church. They were the proof that he was an apostle. They were his seal, marked as belonging to him. It was his obedience to his apostolic commission that had brought him to Corinth in the first place. He was the first one to come all the way to them with the gospel. He had been through a lot of pressure in order to see that church established; and he gave of himself unselfishly for their welfare.

But he was still an enigma to them; they couldn't figure him out. Though he claimed to be an apostle, he didn't act like the authoritative teachers and leaders they knew. He didn't claim his rights as an apostle. The fact that he takes the time and thought to give such a careful defense of his credentials as an apostle of Christ stresses his meekness.

What were those rights that Paul refused to claim? He lists them in vv. 3-6:

**My defense to those who examine me is this: Do we not have a right to eat and drink? Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working? (9:3-6)**

Paul lists three rights, which in essence are really only one. This is summed up in verse 6—that he has the right not to work at a trade to make ends meet; he has the right to be financially supported by them.

The apostle frequently gave up that right. We know from the Book of Acts that he often worked long hours at his trade of tentmaking when he was getting a local congregation off the ground. This was true in Ephesus, a sub-tropical city where not much happened be-

tween the hours of 11:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. During these dead hours Paul preached at the Hall of Tyrannus, in the middle of a full day of work. He was able to say after two full years of ministry: “I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions.” He made the same claim in Thessalonica. In that city, where there was a plethora of eschatological parasites, idlers who sat around waiting for the return of Christ, it was important to the witness of the gospel that he model a pattern of hard work and financial independence. And we know that Paul also worked in Corinth, laboring with Priscilla and Aquila in their leather shop.

In the Corinthians’ mind Paul worked, not because he was giving up those rights, but because he lacked them. Since he didn’t accept their patronage, they decided he must not be a genuine apostle. In fact, Paul writes in 2 Cor. 12:13: “How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!”

There are two principles we can draw from these verses:

#### A. A pastoral ministry is worthy of material support

First, they set forth Paul’s defense of a pastoral ministry being supported by a congregation. These days, many people think that men become preachers in order to make a living off others. They are parasites, in other words. Many people think that no one in the ministry really works. More than once I have been told that I have an easy life, that I work only one day a week. I am invisible six days a week and incomprehensible on the seventh! When Paul says he has a right not to work for a living, he does not mean that there is no work involved in a pastoral ministry. He is talking about having to work at a trade to earn a living. He says it is proper that we devote our energy to study, teaching and prayer.

In verses 7-14, Paul gives the basis for that right. The Corinthians needed some strong arguments to pry them free from their rights and their acquisitive attitude as Christians. He gives five solid reasons for the legitimacy of these rights: First, he says it is common practice.

**Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard, and does not eat the fruit of it? Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock? (9:7)**

The three metaphors, the soldier, the farmer, and the shepherd, are commonly used in the Bible for the Christian ministry. No matter which perspective you take, common practice assumes that a person will receive his appropriate “perks.” The soldier gets his equipment, without which he cannot fight; the fruit farmer won’t go to the market to buy apples; the shepherd will have the meat from his flock on his table. What could be more fair, more normal, more proper? The analogy is clear: The apostle should be expected to be sustained from his “produce,” from his “flock”—the church that owes its existence to him.

Not only is it common practice, but, second, it is a scriptural precept. Verses 8-10:

**I am not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does not the law also say these things? For it is written in the Law of Moses, “you shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing.” God is not concerned about oxen, is he? Or is He speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher to thresh in hope of sharing the crops. (9:8-10)**

Paul says the principle can be supported biblically, from Deut. 25:4: “you shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.” Why not? Because hard workers deserve to be rewarded for their labors. God didn’t add that piece to the law in Deuteronomy merely because he cared for oxen (which he does). He was explaining a principle—it was for our sake. (By the way, this is beautiful lesson on how to interpret the Old Testament. Even these common rules and regulations about animal care were written down to instruct us about our relationships with one another.) Both the plowman and the thresher should expect to receive a share of the profits. It is not just the milk of human kindness, but the method of divine sharing.

Third, says Paul, it is intrinsically just.

**If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much that we should reap material things from you? If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things, that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ. (9:11-12)**

In essence, Paul is asking the Corinthians how much the gospel means to them. What does it mean to you to have been brought from darkness into light? What do all these “spiritual blessings” mean to you? Is there any gratitude in your heart for the “grace of God which was given to you in Christ Jesus”? One of the most instinctive habits in believers is the gift of hospitality and generosity. If we have been on the receiving end of spiritual blessing, we want to demonstrate our thankfulness to God in tangible ways.

Next, Paul refers to Jewish custom. Verse 13:

**Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share with the altar? (9:13)**

The Corinthians need look no further than the Jewish temple to see the same principle in operation. Paul, however, probably had the temple in Jerusalem in mind. According to the Old Testament, the sacrifices were divided up among the Levites in order to care for them. They actually ate some of the meat and the meal offerings, and they used the wine and oil that was brought to the temple. It was all commanded by God.

Paul concludes his argument with the fact that this principle is Christ’s command. Verse 14:

**So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel. (9:14)**

The principle is clear: a pastoral ministry is worthy of material support. Though there are pastors and ministries that have abused this principle through their own self-indulgence and laziness, this is how the Lord desires his kingdom to operate.

Having said that I want to share another principle:

#### B. The demonstration of a ministry is the basis for support

In Paul’s case, as it should be in the case of anyone seeking support, the ministry came first, and then the support, not the other way around. The demonstration of having a ministry is always the basis for the raising of support. You never read of anyone in the New Testament trying to raise support to launch a ministry. We would solve a lot of problems in the church today if we would follow this principle.

After this impressive argument by the apostle in which he claims his rights, we come to the point of this chapter. He now goes on to make a completely contradictory case.

## II. An apostle's restraint: The privilege of ministry (9:15-27)

Though he had every right to be supported financially, Paul deliberately chose not to exercise that right. In verses 15-27 he shares an approach to ministry that is a timeless challenge to everyone called to share in the gospel. This challenges the power-hungry mentality of the Corinthians, and it will challenge us as well. The rest of the chapter falls into three sections. In each, Paul reveals an important principle about his own ministry. They are crucial reminders to us as well.

### A. Ministry is a stewardship—learn to be sacrificial

Verses 15-18:

**But I have used none of those things. And I am not writing these things that it may be done so in my case; for it would be better for me to die than to have any man make my boast an empty one. For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me. What then is my reward? That when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. (9:15-18)**

Paul is simply not concerned about rights. He has deliberately chosen to forgo every one of them. He had the inner freedom to do so. He says in v. 12: “we endure all things, that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.” He was passionately gripped by Jesus Christ, and like his Master, he wanted to become a model of the gospel itself. The message of the gospel is the free grace of God. Paul wanted his life and ministry to reflect that truth.

Barrett puts it well: “The gospel, which turned upon the love and self-sacrifice of Jesus, could not be fitly presented by preachers who insisted on their rights, delighted in the exercise of authority, and made what profit they could out of the work of evangelism.”

The word “hinder” in v. 12 is graphic and somewhat unusual. It means literally “a cutting into,” and was used of breaking up a road to prevent an enemy's advance. Paul had avoided doing anything which might prevent a clear road for the advance of the gospel. He would endure anything to prevent being irresponsible. The word “endure” is one of the eloquent verbs which Paul uses in chapter 13 to describe true love. We have only to read in these two letters the accounts of Paul's sufferings to appreciate something of what it cost him personally to ensure that the gospel-road was free of obstacles. A man who is ready to endure anything for the gospel is not interested in claiming his rights. If he had any rights left in his heart, it was the right to offer the gospel free of charge. He did not enter this vocation for his own profit. He felt no particular pride in preaching the gospel. How could he be proud of something he was irresistibly compelled to do? He could take no credit for that.

It was at Corinth where Paul began to learn the wonderful paradox that weakness was strength, dying was living, poor was rich, and serving was ruling. He was overwhelmed with the privilege of being God's ambassador, and he repudiated the idea that a man could do God any service or kindness and expect payment in return.

The first time I consciously experienced that truth I was at the receiving end of the life of a man who lived like that. A professor in seminary by grace picked me out and began to pour his life into mine. We began to meet regularly, even at early hours in the morning. He gave and gave and gave to me to teach me about ministry.

He married Kathy and me, and I remember how thrilled we were to be able to come up with an honorarium for him. I had never before been able to give him anything. At the wedding I quietly handed him an envelope with a check inside. During the reception later, he came up to me and put something in my pocket. Some time afterwards as we were leaving the reception, I searched my pocket and found the envelope I had given him. There was a note on the check saying, “It was my joy to be here today. Use this to take Kathy somewhere special.” What a model of real Christian ministry! Many of you here today are models of that kind of lifestyle. True ministry is a stewardship. We must learn to be sacrificial.

There is a second principle about ministry:

### B. Ministry is relationships—we must have adaptability

Verses 19-23:

**For though I am free of all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jew I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it. (9:19-23)**

These verses show us how Paul viewed his own position. He truly believed that happiness was found in giving rather than in receiving; and, like his Master, he was ready to give his life. Though he was completely free, he didn't allow that freedom to become an excuse to indulge in his own personal whims. Why? Because, “I do all things for the sake of the gospel.” Every encounter, every personal habit must be evaluated in light of that, because the gospel dominated his whole life. He was living daily in light of eternity, ministering with integrity, and conducting his relationships with adaptability. In this passage he shares what it meant for him, a wealthy, educated, religious Jew, to make himself a slave of all. He sacrificed matters of racial identity, religious sensitivity and personal conscience. He had one goal in mind: that I might win the more.

That word “win” occurs five times in this paragraph. In verse 22 Paul clearly states what he means by it: that I may by all means save some. He knew that what was at stake in his ministry was not merely the success or failure of human persuasion, but a person's eternal destiny. His fundamental philosophy was to discover the methods which combined the greatest integrity with the greatest impact. A closer look at his servant lifestyle shows that he was ready to give up the most unchangeable aspects of his Judaism if that would open a door for the gospel. He was concerned with the desires, the personalities, the bents and sensitivities of his hearers. As one commentator put it: “His Judaism was no longer of his very being, but a guise he could adopt or discard at will.”

There were occasions such as the circumcision of Timothy, and in discharging a Nazarite vow in the temple at Jerusalem, when he was ready to go through actions which in Christ were unnecessary. Then, by contrast, he refused to bow to the pressure of the Judaizers who wanted Titus to be circumcised. He identified with those under the law and those without law. He was ready to go back under the limitations of religious ceremony and ritual in the Jewish law, consisting of 613 written precepts in the Pentateuch, along with their oral



amplification. These were accepted by Jews as the divinely appointed way to life, but Paul had discovered them to be an instrument of death. In certain instances, however, he was willing to put himself under the law once more in order to avoid starting a relationship off on the wrong foot. Equally, he was prepared to ignore all religious obligations in order to win those who were beyond the shadow of religious establishment. Then, lest they misunderstand the implications of being outside the law, he adds that he was still under the law of Christ. And lastly, he adjusted to the conscientious scruples of those who didn't have the freedom to do some of the things he felt free to do: "To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak." He goes back to the issue at hand, which is the food offered to idols, and says that though he was a strong person with an informed and robust conscience he was prepared to curtail that freedom if required.

It is clear from this passage that it is God's desire for us to exercise the most imaginative and sensitive adaptability in our relationships with others, especially unbelievers. Paul did it for the sake of the gospel, that its power and reality might be experienced as far and wide as possible. I have become all things to all men. Paul was a spiritual chameleon. His versatility is a challenge to us to cross the culture gap that exists between the Christian sub-culture, with its spiritual lingo, and the pagan culture in which we live. The task of identification and incarnation into our world is one of the biggest tasks we face. Somehow we have to bridge that gap. I am not saying we must sacrifice our integrity, but we should use all creative means at our disposal so that the gospel can penetrate this valley. Ministry is all about relationships, thus we must learn to be adaptable and flexible. Are we clinging to rights and habits that are not wrong in themselves, but are preventing us from ministering to others? Let's do some personal examination to see if these things are preventing us bringing life to other people.

There is a third principle here.

### C. Ministry is a training ground—allow yourself to be disciplined

Verses 24-27:

**Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified. (9:24-27)**

Paul is concerned with the flabby spiritual lives of many of the Corinthians. They wanted rewards without work. They were more concerned with pleasant surroundings than with proper training conditions. He has a metaphor they would understand. The Isthmian Games took place in Corinth every two years. The streets of the city would have been filled with athletes in training for these prestigious events. Paul says it is evident that every athlete exercises self-control because he has a goal; he wants a prize. If self-discipline is crucial to gain a crown made of pinewood, then surely the Christian race ought to be run with the same dedication.

When Paul speaks of fearing disqualification, he is not referring to losing his salvation. We saw in chapter 3 that those who are involved in ministry will have to face an extremely thorough examination from the Lord about the quality of their work. We will be tested "by fire" to a degree that will expose the materials used in our building. Those in Christ cannot lose their salvation, but they can find that their service for Christ has been empowered with their own resources and for their own glory. That is what Paul supremely feared.

These verses became very personal to me last night. We have had the flu in our house this past couple of weeks, and Kathy has been exhausted. I thought we at last had seen the end of it, and I told Kathy it would be good for her to take a couple of days to visit her parents, taking along our youngest son, Timothy, while I watched the two older boys. But last night Stephen had stomach convulsions the like of which I had never seen before. As he lay there, screaming in pain, my first thought was, "No, Lord, I've got to preach in the morning! I need my rest." And I was serious, because if my wife were at home, she would have taken care of things while I got my sleep. Hour after hour after hour I got to rub my eight-year-old's stomach while he was sick and in pain. As I did so I thought a lot about verse 27 and the danger I faced at that moment of thinking that my ministry simply involved preaching to others. Ministry takes place quietly, when no one is looking—in that Sunday School class, year after year, but no one has praised you. That is the training ground where we learn how to give, where we learn discipline. That is what power and authority is all about.

In verses 26-27, Paul warns the Corinthians, and us as well, not to live aimlessly, without purpose, indulging ourselves.

My friends, our objective in this life is to be useful and pleasing instruments of God to be used whenever and wherever he desires. That is what Paul is exhorting us to. When he awoke in the morning those were his first thoughts. That set his agenda for the day. He was ready to give up certain indulgences if they interfered with his objective of being what God wanted him to be. Is that your objective? Have you ever asked yourself, "Why am I here? Why was I born at this time of history, in this area?" God intends to use you. He made you for a purpose. He designed you with your unique abilities and talents that you might be useful and pleasing to him in your world as an instrument of his gospel.

That is our challenge. Let us reconsider what real ministry is, what real authority is. Maybe we will have to stoop down, maybe we will have to hand our plate to the waiter, as we learn to be sacrificial, flexible, and disciplined in our Christian lives.

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