
Bible Knowledge Commentary - 1 Cor 9:1-27

b. The Regulation of Privilege ([9:1-10:13](#))

(1) The Positive Example of Paul ([chap. 9](#)).

[9:1-2](#)

»[Front Matter](#) »[Intro](#) »[Outline](#) »[Bibliography](#)

b. The regulation of privilege ([9:1-10:13](#))

(1) The positive example of Paul ([chap. 9](#)).

Paul ended his warning about exercising freedom if it had detrimental effects on a brother with a statement expressing his willingness to be a vegetarian if it would keep a brother from faltering in his faith ([8:13](#)). He then illustrated how he practiced what he preached in this matter of rights when applied to food and drink. It seemed that the rumblings of doubt about his apostleship, which would later call forth an extended defense (esp. [2 Cor. 10-13](#)), had already started. Paul neatly illustrated the principle expressed in [1 Corinthians 8](#) by relating it to the issue which seems to have been a bone of contention concerning his apostleship. That issue was his steadfast refusal to derive material support from those to whom he was ministering, so no one could say he was motivated by money (cf. [2 Cor. 2:17](#)).

9:1-2. Paul affirmed that his position as **an apostle** was like that of the knowledgeable Christian in this matter of freedom and rights. The four questions in these verses were rhetorical and expected an affirmative reply, though some among the Corinthians may have denied one or all of them. The third and fourth questions seem directly related to apostolic authority, but apparently Paul believed that the fourth one was more significant than the third. In the course of an extended defense of his **apostleship** in 2 Corinthians he never mentioned seeing the **Lord** (cf. [Acts 1:21](#)) but he returned repeatedly to the theme of this verse ([1 Cor. 9:2](#)) that the Corinthians themselves were his vindication ([2 Cor. 3:1-3](#); [5:12](#); [7:14-16](#); [8:24](#)).

[9:3](#)

9:3. Paul's **defense** looked forward (to [vv. 4-23](#)) and not back (to [vv. 1-2](#), which guaranteed a right he had willingly forfeited). Paul's defense, then, was an explanation of why he refused to be maintained at the church's expense even though he had a fight to such support ([vv. 1-2](#)). This served also as a positive example of his counsel to the knowledgeable brother who was concerned about his rights ([chap. 8](#)).

[9:4-6](#)

9:4-6. The word **right** in these verses is the same word (exousia) translated "freedom" in [8:9](#). It links the chapters, though Paul's subject here was not sacrificial meat but ordinary **food**. To bring out the meaning of these rhetorical questions the phrase "at the expense of the church" could be added to [verses 4-5](#) (cf. [Matt. 10:10-11](#)). Paul was not alone in refusing this right but had an ally in **Barnabas**. Commitment to this practice may have marked their first missionary

journey together ([Acts 13:1-14:28](#)) and apparently continued to characterize their separate ministries.

[9:7](#)

9:7. Paul saw the right of maintenance as a principle which extended beyond the apostles to others in the church; he illustrated the point along six different lines. The first was custom. The **soldier**, farmer, and shepherd are all supported by their work.

[9:8-10](#)

9:8-10. Second, the Old Testament itself substantiated the principle of just remuneration. Paul's illustration and interpretation has perplexed many commentators. Why did Paul, after referring to the practice of not muzzling a grain-treading ox, then ask, **Is it about oxen that God is concerned?** Was he changing the sense of the Old Testament passage? Not among the perplexed was Luther who tried to cut this Gordian knot by observing that since oxen cannot read, Paul's point in the passage was transparent. Problems nonetheless remain for less exuberant interpreters. The solution is probably found in the context of [Deuteronomy 25:4](#) which Paul quoted. That chapter contains instructions not about animal husbandry but human relationships. Not muzzling an ox, therefore, was probably a proverbial expression concerning just remuneration, properly understood and interpreted as such by Paul. A modern parallel would be the adage, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," which is commonly applied in contexts other than canine obedience.

[9:11](#)

9:11. Paul's third illustration grew out of [verse 10](#) and his discussion of [Deuteronomy 25:4](#), but it concerned a basic principle of community reciprocity: beneficial service should be rewarded. If Paul had been used to bring **spiritual** riches to the Corinthians ([1 Cor. 1:5](#)), **material** recompense was surely not **too much** to expect.

[9:12](#)

9:12. A fourth line of appeal was made to the precedent of other Christian leaders. Paul had earlier alluded to the ministry of Peter (Cephas) ([v. 5](#)). Though unattested, it is probable that Peter ministered in Corinth (cf. [1:12](#); [3:22](#); [15:5](#)) and was supported during that time by the church. The same was probably also true of Apollos ([1:12](#); [3:4-6](#), [22](#); [4:6](#); [16:12](#)). If the church supported them, their founding father Paul was surely no less deserving. Yet Paul did not exercise **this right** (cf. [8:9](#)) because he did not want to **hinder** the response of anyone to **the gospel**. Had he been materially recompensed for his ministry, some might have presumed he was simply another itinerant educator motivated by profits (cf. [2 Cor. 2:17](#)) and would have refused him a hearing. To avoid being a "stumbling block" ([1 Cor. 8:9](#)) to any, Paul relinquished his right to receive **support from** those to whom he ministered.

[9:13](#)

[9:13](#). Paul had temporarily interrupted his catalog of illustrations on the right of recompense to underscore the rationale behind his own refusal to exercise that right, despite its general practice by other worthy servants of Christ ([v. 5](#)). He then offered a fifth example in support of the right of remuneration by citing the practice of the priesthood. Old Testament priests were remunerated for their service ([Num. 18:8-32](#)), and so were the pagan priests with whom the Corinthians were probably more familiar (cf. [1 Cor. 8:10](#)).

[9:14](#)

[9:14](#). In the sixth place Paul appealed to the weightiest point of all, the instruction of Jesus that those who give out **the gospel** should derive support from it ([Luke 10:7](#)).

[9:15](#)

[9:15](#). With this catalog of arguments completed Paul had convincingly established his **rights** in relation to the Corinthian church. However, he underscored once again (cf. [v. 12](#)) his refusal to exercise those rights. He expressed one reason in [verse 12](#), a desire to avoid any hint of mercenary motivation in his ministry. A second and related reason was now stated: the opportunity to affirm the integrity of his commitment to the ministry (cf. [2 Cor. 11:9-12](#)). This was Paul's **boast**: he ministered willingly and freely from his heart (cf. [2 Cor. 2:17](#)).

[9:16](#)

[9:16](#). Of course Paul's "call" to the ministry was unique. Others have responded voluntarily to the call to follow Christ ([Mark 3:13](#); [John 1:37-39](#)), but Paul was flattened by it ([Acts 22:6-10](#)). Like Jonah, Paul was **compelled to preach** (cf. [1 Cor. 1:17](#)), and like that prophet, **woe** to him if he shirked his task.

[9:17](#)

[9:17](#). The condition, **if I preach voluntarily**, was not true of Paul as he had just said, so he had no claim to any special recompense since he was **simply discharging the trust committed to him** (cf. [Luke 17:10](#)).

[9:18](#)

[9:18](#). Did he then not have any **reward**? Yes; two, in fact. First, he had his boast ([v. 15](#)) that he offered the gospel **free of charge**, and no one could deny that (cf. [2 Cor. 11:9-10](#)). Second, he had the opportunity to see the gospel at work among those to whom he preached ([1 Cor. 9:19, 23](#)), and these results, the believers themselves, were his reward (cf. [2 Cor. 7:3-4](#)). The word translated "reward" (misthos) may also refer to a wage. Paul had shunned material recompense, but he was not without a reward or return for his labor. He had the joy of reaping. To widen that harvest he would gladly give up certain **rights**, among them the right to material support, in order to enjoy both the integrity of his boast about his ministry and the results of his ministry (cf. [John 4:36](#)).

[9:19](#)

9:19. Paul had not shackled the exercise of his rights in the area of food and drink alone (as he had intimated the knowledgeable Christians should do, [8:9-13](#)), but he had applied it to numerous facets of his ministry so that **though** he was **free** (eleutheros; cf. [8:9](#); [9:1](#)) he voluntarily became a **slave** (cf. [Phil. 2:6-7](#)) for the good of others ([1 Cor. 10:33](#)) whom he wanted **to win** ([9:22](#)).

[9:20](#)

9:20. Though Paul was primarily an apostle to the Gentiles ([Gal. 2:8](#)), he never lost his concern for the salvation of his own people ([Rom. 9:3](#)). He made it his custom to seek out the synagogue in each town he entered ([Acts 17:2](#)) in order **to win the Jews** ([Rom. 1:16](#)). No verse points out more starkly Paul's own consciousness of what he was, both before and after meeting Christ. Before, he was the Jew's **Jew**, faultless with regard to legalistic righteousness ([Phil. 3:6](#)). Afterward, he was a new man ([2 Cor. 5:17](#); [Gal. 2:20](#)), who had found in Christ the righteousness he had sought ([Rom. 10:4](#); [1 Cor. 1:30](#)). He was still a Hebrew ([2 Cor. 11:22](#); [Phil 3:5](#)), but he was no longer a Jew living according to the Law (**I... am not under the law**). Still, he was willing to subject himself to the scruples of the Jews (e.g., [Acts 21:23-36](#)) in order to gain a hearing for the gospel and **to win** them to Christ. Yet he never compromised the essence of the gospel at the heart of which was salvation by faith, not works ([Gal. 2:16](#); [Eph. 2:8-9](#)) and freedom from legalism ([Gal. 2:4-5](#)).

[9:21](#)

9:21. In contrast to the Jews, “those under the Law” (v. 20), **those not having the Law** were the Gentiles. Among Gentiles, Paul was willing to abandon past scruples of a morally indifferent sort, such as eating meat offered sacrificially to a pagan god ([10:27](#); cf. [Acts 15:29](#)), in order **to win** Gentiles to Christ. But though Paul was a forceful advocate of liberty ([Gal. 5:1](#)), he did not suggest he was an advocate of libertinism (cf. [1 Cor. 6:12-20](#)). He was still under authority, but not to the Old Testament Law. He was responsible to God (cf. [3:9](#)) and Christ (cf. [4:1](#)) and was enabled by the Spirit to fulfill the law of love ([Rom. 13:8-10](#); [Gal. 5:13-25](#)), the opposite of lawlessness (cf. [Matt. 24:12](#) where lawlessness drives out love). **Christ's law** ([Gal. 6:2](#)) was to love God and man ([Mark 12:30-31](#)), which law Paul obeyed ([1 Cor. 10:31-33](#)).

[9:22](#)

9:22. In his references to Jews and Gentiles in the preceding verses, Paul explained his voluntary restraint of freedom in order to reach unbelievers with the gospel. Some suggest that **the weak** in this verse refers to Jews and Gentiles together in a state of unbelief and so was intended to summarize Paul's previously stated convictions (cf. [Rom. 5:6](#) where “the weak” are also called “the ungodly”). It is more likely, however, that Paul was referring explicitly to the weak Corinthians described in 1 Corinthians 5:25 [8:9-11](#) (cf. Jew, Greeks, and the church of God in [10:32](#)). His concern **to win** them was not in the preliminary sense of justification as in the case of unbelieving Jews and Gentiles ([9:20-21](#)) but to win the Corinthians in terms of sanctification and maturity in Christ (cf. [Matt. 18:15](#))—and so to **save** them for God's ongoing work in their lives

(cf. [1 Cor. 5:5](#); [8:11](#)). Paul's condescension to the scruples and customs of **all men** (cf. "everyone" in [9:19](#)) found application on a momentary case-by-case basis since it would be impossible to satisfy simultaneously the penchants of both Jews and Gentiles alike.

[9:23](#)

9:23. Paul voluntarily did this in order to gain the widest possible hearing for **the gospel** and so to **share in its blessings** as God's fellow worker ([3:9](#)), reaping the joyful harvest of many won to Christ (cf. [John 4:36](#)).

[9:24-25](#)

9:24-25. Paul's commitment to this course of ministry did not come easily. It required personal discipline (**strict training**) like that of an athlete who strove for supremacy in his field (cf. [15:10](#)). To that end Paul willingly gave up certain privileges which might otherwise be his to enjoy so that he could win **the prize**. The prize for Paul was not the temporary **crown** (stephanon) bestowed by men (in the biennial games near Corinth the "crown" was a pine wreath) but the eternal **crown** bestowed by Christ ([3:13-14](#); [2 Cor. 5:10](#)). Paul's crown would be the consummation of the reward ([1 Cor. 9:18](#)) he partially enjoyed, the opportunity to glory before Christ in those he had been able to win ([2 Cor. 1:14](#); [Phil. 2:16](#); [1 Thes. 2:19](#)).

[9:26-27](#)

9:26-27. Paul's dictum of becoming "all things to all men" ([v. 22](#)) could have been construed as the aimless capitulation of an unprincipled man. But it was just the opposite! Every move made in the course of his race was calculated to further his pursuit of the prize (cf. [Phil. 3:13-14](#)). Every blow struck was meant to land squarely on his opponent and send him reeling from the contest (cf. [Eph. 6:12](#); [James 4:7](#)). To achieve this, Paul would not let his body master him (cf. [1 Cor. 6:12](#)); sometimes he denied even its demand for rightful privileges and pleasures ([8:9](#)) for a greater good ([10:33](#)).

Paul was competing well himself and had called many to join him (the word *preached* is *kēryxas*, the noun form of which signified a herald who summoned contestants to a race), but that did not guarantee him a victorious finish. He held out the possibility that even he could **be disqualified for the prize**. The single Greek word translated by that phrase (*adokimos*) literally means "unapproved." In other contexts it was applied to the unsaved (e.g., [Rom. 1:28](#); [Titus 1:16](#)). Here Paul was not addressing the issue of salvation, nor for that matter was even the prize specifically in mind. Rather, he seemed concerned with continuance in the race. Like the brother who had indulged in immorality ([1 Cor. 5:1-5](#)), Paul's life could be cut short by the disciplinary disapproval of God. God had disciplined in the past ([10:6-10](#)), was disciplining in the present ([11:30-32](#)), and would discipline in the immediate future ([5:5](#)). Paul was concerned that some might not be able to say with him one day, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race" ([2 Tim. 4:7](#)), but would find themselves cut off in the midst of the contest by the disciplinary action of God.