

The Proof is in the Pudding

1 Corinthians 9

We are in 1 Corinthians 9 this morning, which is an interesting chapter in which Paul defends his ministry as an Apostle of Jesus. An Apostle at that time was someone who had personally seen Jesus and been specifically sent out by him to preach the gospel. The Apostles had higher authority than the rest of Christians because of that. They had a special anointing from the Holy Spirit so that they taught with the authority of Christ. Their authority was such that we consider their writings be inspired by God himself, which is why Christians both then and now devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching.

Having Apostolic authority was a big deal for Paul and for the people he ministered to. With that authority they could trust that what he said was from God and accurately portrayed God's will. Along with the other Apostles' teachings, it provided the basis of beliefs for their faith that could be passed on from person to person as Christianity spread.

But there were people that didn't like Paul. They didn't like his preaching, they didn't like the influence he was having, and they were trying to undermine his ministry and effectiveness. And one of the ways they did that was by casting doubt on his credibility as an Apostle. If they could convince people he wasn't really an Apostle, it would ruin his ministry and effectiveness; it would remove the authority of his teaching in the churches. People wouldn't listen to him.

Some of these people had begun to try to do that in Corinth. And one of the ways was to point to Paul's teaching we looked at last week – Paul boldly taught that if practicing your Christian liberty causes people to stumble and sin, you should not practice it around them, even if you have biblical grounds to stand on and firmly believe you have the right to do so. You shouldn't assert your rights if it causes others to stumble.

Paul's opponents said that teaching was evidence that he wasn't a true Apostle. I don't know exactly what angle they took, but they were using it against him and trying to stir up skepticism and doubt – probably appealing to those who most stubbornly insisted that they had the right to eat meat and attend idol feasts whether others liked it or not. So after delivering that teaching, Paul followed it

up with a defense of his Apostolic ministry. He defended himself to the Corinthian believers and showed them how they could be sure that he truly was an Apostle.

Now, none of us has to worry about defending ourselves as an Apostle today. None of us are Apostles in that sense anymore, which means none of us can relate directly to what Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians 9. But there is another way we can apply what he writes in this chapter that parallels something in our lives today, which is what I want us to focus on...

As Christians, we have been called to spread the gospel in our communities and it's very important that the people we minister to see us as credible witnesses. The only way people are going to listen to what we have to say is if we have credibility and can be seen as people worth listening to. We need to have a good reputation. This is a big deal for Christians. This was one of the ways the gospel spread in the early church – unbelievers saw what was happening in the believing community and wanted to be part of it. Our credibility is very important if we are going to lead people to Christ and not repel them.

But our corporate credibility has taken a huge hit in recent years. Some Christians have treated the unbelieving world like enemies to defeat instead of lost souls to reach. They've condemned sinners and pushed them away rather than having compassion for them. They've fought instead of loved. They've argued instead of listened. They've spouted dogmatism rather than listening to what people have to say. There have been enough outspoken Christian zealots who have done a lot of damage, and it only takes a few Christians spewing harmful things to ruin it for all of us. We all get lumped together whether we want to or not. And so unbelievers are going to have assumptions and perceptions of us that aren't true for most of us. We're in a hole that we have to climb out of before anyone is going to listen to us again.

How are we going to do that? What can we do to earn credibility back so that unbelievers might actually listen and hear what we have to say? Paul had to climb out of a hole that his enemies put him in and the way he did that is the same way I think we can climb out of the hole we're in. And that's what he writes about in 1 Corinthians 9. So let's work our way through this chapter and see what he has to say.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:1-2.

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? ² 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.

This sounds like a strange way to start a new paragraph and chapter until you realize what's going on behind it. Paul sounds defensive – and he is. Because of where this comes in the letter we can safely assume he's defensive because of how his opponents were using the teaching he just gave in chapter 8 to try to ruin his credibility as an Apostle. After boldly declaring: "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble" at the end of chapter 2, he immediately begins to defend himself.

His opponents must have been saying something like, "If Paul won't eat meat, he can't be an Apostle." I don't know why they would come to that conclusion, but whatever it was, Paul was in need of defending himself. So he uses a series of rhetorical questions in verse 1 in which the assumed answer is "yes."

- Am I not free? Yes, he is free. He is free in Christ to eat meat, but he won't if it causes a brother to stumble.
- Am I not an apostle? Yes, he is an apostle, even though some said he wasn't. And he points to two evidences of his Apostolic calling...
- Have I not seen Jesus our Lord (which was a requirement for being an Apostle)? Yes, he has seen Jesus.
- Are you not my workmanship in the Lord (another evidence of his Apostolic ministry)? Yes, they were. They became Christ-followers as a direct result of his ministry among them.

So he has them think about these things and then he goes on with his defense.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:3-7.

³ This is my defense to those who would examine me. ⁴ Do we not have the right to eat and drink? ⁵ 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? ⁶ Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? ⁷ 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?

So again he hits on several questions in rapid succession to get them thinking. All of these questions and obvious answers point to the same thing – that as an

Apostle he had the right to be fairly compensated by them for his ministry among them. So he had the right to buy food and drink for himself. He had the right to have a believing wife accompany him in ministry. He had the right to refrain from working another job. But the only way he could do those things were if he was getting paid for his ministry.

And they all knew he wasn't, which provides the groundwork for his defense. Paul wouldn't accept compensation from them even though he had the right to do so. That's what he's pointing out. A soldier gets paid for his service. A vineyard worker shares in the fruit. A shepherd gets some of the milk. It's normal for people, in whatever work they do, to get paid for doing that work. That's their right. But Paul wasn't getting paid – he refused his right. That's what he's pointing out. He goes on in verse 8...

Read 1 Corinthians 9:8-12a.

⁸ Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? ⁹ 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? ¹⁰ Does he not certainly speak 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. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? ¹² If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?

So now he points to the Bible to confirm his right to get paid for his ministry among them. He quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." When an ox is doing its work to tread out the grain, it was commanded by God that they don't muzzle it so that it could eat. It was partaking of a portion of the product it was providing. And Paul says, "That verse isn't about the oxen. God put that in there for us." The person working the plow and the person working the thresher should all expect to share in the crop that they worked to bring in.

Likewise, he points out in verse 11, those who do the spiritual work of ministry should expect to receive material compensation. In fact, he says, they deserve it even more because of the importance of that work. So again he's hitting home this right that he had as an Apostle to get paid, even though he didn't. And he keeps going...

Read 1 Corinthians 9:12b-14

Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. ¹³ Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

So he brings in a very similar example of what happens at the temple followed by direct command from Jesus. Those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who work at the altar eat the food from the sacrifices, and Jesus commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. Luke 10:7 is one example where Jesus told his disciples: *“And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages.”*

Paul has made it crystal clear that he has the right to get paid for his ministry among them, yet has intentionally refused that right. You can see in Acts 18:1-4 that when Paul was in Corinth he made and sold tents to make a living. And here he begins to point to his reason for doing so – he’d rather go hungry and travel without a wife and work another side job to make money to live off of than insist on getting paid by them because he felt in that situation that getting paid would be a hindrance to the gospel for some of them. So he refused his right. In chapter 8 he called them to refuse their right to eat meat if it caused a weaker brother to stumble, Paul went so far as to refuse his right to get paid for ministry.

That was a significant refusal. It was so obvious that he should have been getting paid, but he intentionally refused. He wanted to get them thinking: “Why would Paul do that?” He was preparing them to hear the core of his defense of being an Apostle, and he begins to answer in the next few verses.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:15-18.

¹⁵ But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting. ¹⁶ For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷ For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? That in my

preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

The way this is written is confusing to me, but I found a helpful explanation in Leon Morris' commentary on 1 Corinthians. He points out that in these verses Paul is basically telling them that it was his particular delight to be able to preach the gospel free of charge. He found great delight and reward in preaching the gospel for free. Preaching the gospel was one thing – he was definitely compelled to do that and felt very strongly that he had to. Christ had entrusted that stewardship to him. But what brought him great delight was to do it for free, and he wasn't about to let anyone deprive him of that. He found such delight in preaching for free that he'd rather die than accept pay.

And why did it bring him such great delight? That's what he explains next...

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

¹⁹ For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Paul's great delight was to share in the blessings of the gospel with anyone and everyone who would listen to him and turn to Jesus. That brought him great joy. You know what didn't do that for him? Asserting his rights. He could have – he was free from all and could have done whatever he wanted to, regardless of what others might think, but he didn't. He refused his rights if he perceived that asserting them would be a hindrance to the gospel.

So, he refused to eat meat around those who struggled with it – he didn't want to turn them away from the gospel and Christ. He refused to get paid for ministry because he didn't want that to be the reason anyone would shut their ears to what he had to say. He made himself a servant to all that he might win more of them to Christ. When he was with Jews and those still bound by the law, he didn't

assert his rights to not follow the law. Instead, he became like them under the law that he might win them to Christ – that’s credibility. When he was with Gentiles who weren’t under the law, he became like them so as not to put a barrier in their way – credibility. When he was with those whose consciences were weak and couldn’t eat meat, he became like them – credibility. He became all things to all people that he might win some to Christ. He was more concerned about their salvation than about asserting his rights. And that gave him credibility as an Apostle wherever he went.

He finishes this chapter with an illustration to summarize his heart and challenge them to become like him...

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27.

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Paul wasn’t aimless or random in what he was doing. He was very intentional and disciplined in how he acted around others because he longed for the imperishable prize that awaits all who are in Christ, and he didn’t want to be disqualified by hard-heartedly insisting on his rights.

When I look at Paul’s defense, what I see is: the proof is in the pudding. The proof is in the pudding – that’s a saying we use that originates with the idea that you can find out if pudding, or any food, is good by trying it out – tasting and eating it. Whether it’s good or bad, the proof will be there. The proof was there for Paul. He demonstrated throughout his ministry that the blessings of sharing in the gospel with others was so important that he was willing to refuse his rights so that he could become all things to all people that he might win some. That’s what proved to others that he was a true Apostle. The proof is in the pudding.

What about us? Are we willing to go that far so that the people we’ve been called to reach might share in the blessings of the gospel with us? Are we willing to refuse to assert our rights and become a servant to others so that we don’t hinder them from hearing the gospel? Many Christians are not. They would sooner stand

up for their rights and fight for what they want and they ruin their credibility with the people they've been called to reach.

My neighbor has a gay rights flag in their window, a Bernie Sanders bumper sticker on their car right next to a Coexist bumper sticker. How should I respond to them? Should I exercise my rights by putting Christians flags, Trump signs, and "Jesus is the only way" signs in my yard and on my bumper? I could – and I would ruin my credibility and witness forever with them. Or I could serve them by refusing to assert my rights so as not to hinder them from hearing the gospel. That doesn't mean I have to support the things they support, but it does mean choosing not to fight against them. The proof is in the pudding.

What is your pudding doing for your credibility with the unbelievers around you – the people Christ has called you to reach? Have you left the door open for them to hear about Jesus from you? Or have you slammed it shut by asserting your rights? Unbelievers are watching and listening, and they've seen Christians doing and saying a lot of things that have hardened their hearts. We can't control what they see from others, but we can control what they see from us. Do people see the love of Christ in you, or that your rights are more important? Do they see that you're open to them, or that you judge them and want nothing to do with them?

The proof is in the pudding. I want to challenge all of us to examine our lives and ask ourselves what we can do to become more credible witnesses to the unbelievers around us. Are there attitudes toward unbelievers that need to change? Are there behaviors that are shutting them out? Are we saying things they will perceive as hateful? What are ways that you can become all things to the people around you to open the door for the sharing of the gospel? How can you love your neighbor as yourself? How can you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you? How can you build people up on social media rather than tearing them down? May the Holy Spirit help us to see where we need to grow in this area.