



## A Living Paradigm of the Gospel

I Corinthians 9:1-23 | Austin Becton | November 16, 2014

We are continuing our series, “Saints Together,” where we’ve been walking through I Corinthians. The Corinthian church was a fairly divisive crowd. They made party lines between Paul, Apollos, and Cephas; divided on eating meat offered to idols; and were even suing one another. Last Sunday, we were in chapter 8 where Paul had just finished contending for the “strong” Corinthians to surrender their right – their liberty – to eat meat offered to idols for the sake of their “weaker” brothers and sisters. He challenged them to make a paradigm shift from liberty to love. In I Corinthians 9:1-23, Paul continues his argument from chapter 8 against the Corinthians’ undue divisiveness, notably the strong of conscious against the weak.

As most know, we have just concluded another election year. Democrats, Republicans, Independents, the Green Party, and all the other parties no one has ever heard of have been out campaigning. Deep in our core we all know that politics exist because everyone cannot have his or her way. One person wants prayer in school and another does not. One is willing to pay higher taxes and the other is not. Our decisions impact the broader community, and as such, someone’s rights are going to be sacrificed, willingly or not. Compromise is part of the American, democratic vision. Margaret Mitchell connects this political realism to church life when she states, “Political realism dictates that everyone cannot have their way in everything. What is required for concord is a redefinition of freedom from an individualistic to a corporate perspective. Factionalism can be stopped only by compromise, where each side ceases to think only of what it is their right to do, and instead makes a concession to the other side for the sake of the greater good.” What Mitchell is saying is that we *have* to compromise, not for the sake of compromise itself or simply getting along, but for the sake of the “greater good.” But what is this greater good? In our text today, we will see that this greater good is the flourishing of the church as saints together on gospel mission.

### Saints Together

In chapter 9, Paul starts by asking the Corinthians a series of rhetorical questions... “Am I not free? (v.1) 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?” (v.4-5) Paul anticipates the Corinthians’ objections to what he was arguing for in chapter 8... “But, aren’t we free from the Law? Isn’t this our right as ones who live under God’s grace?” We often do the same in the midst of dealing with differences of conviction. Don’t I have freedom in Christ to drink beer or wine at city group? Why do we have to have a “booze ban” in our city groups - aren’t I free to have a glass of wine? Am I not free to spend my hard earned money *wisely* on a few things for myself? A new shirt? A new pair of shoes? An upgrade on my car? I give generously. Do I not have the right to justice if I’ve been wronged? Don’t I have the freedom to stay home after an exhausting day at work instead of joining my city group to serve?

Paul continues, “Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?” He uses this rhetorical process throughout I Corinthians. Repeating their concerns back to them, he draws them into the heart of his point. Here and through verse 14, Paul appears to be fighting for his “rights” as an apostle to receive financial support from the church. He contends, “Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same?” And, “In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.” Paul had a legitimate, God-ordained right to receive financial support from the Corinthian church. In the same vain, we follow this practice of financially supporting our staff (Jonathan, Ian, Preston, Matt). We do this, as we believe God has called us to free these individuals up for the work of ministry and the equipping of the saints. However, in this particular case with the Corinthians, Paul’s objective was not to obtain these rights. He says in verse 15, “But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. He was not fighting for his “right” to eat and drink, “right” to get married, or his “right” to receive financial support. As 2 Corinthians 11:7-9 and 12:13 clarifies, Paul, not wanting to burden the church of Corinth, sacrificed his financial rights so the church would flourish. Consider the preacher that preaches for free at a church plant or one dealing with financial struggles. Consider the person that freely volunteers their time to babysit for a church function so parents can attend.\

Notice Paul’s examples and the rights he gave up – with the exception of perhaps eating and drinking – these are not morally grey areas and were God constituted rights. This is critical to understand the scope of Paul’s argument as we unpack this passage. Richard Hays observes, “In principle, Paul has the right to eat what he wants, to be accompanied by a wife like the other apostles, and to be supported financially by the churches that he has founded. Yet, as the Corinthians already know, he does not do any of these things. Therefore, the very posing of the questions suggests the important distinction between having a right and exercising it.”

We are free in Christ. We aren’t challenging that. Paul says in Galatians...“For you were called to freedom, brothers.” But we are challenging what he continues to say, “Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Are we willing to serve – sacrifice our rights for – one another in love for the sake of being saints together, the flourishing of the church? I want to challenge you to consider with me this morning our willingness to sacrifice our rights. Are you willing to forgo your right to have a glass of wine at your city group gathering for the sake of the flourishing of the city group and the friend who struggles with over indulging? Or perhaps they simply have a weaker conscious on the issue. Are you willing to freely give up your hard earned money so that the church can thrive, equipping the saints and blessing others? Are you willing to sacrifice your right for justice and instead share grace and mercy with the guy in city group that was rude to you or perhaps gossiped about you? Are you willing to lay down your time of rest after an exhausting day to serve the poor along side your city group? So, how is this different than any other community outside the church? Don’t we all have to compromise for the sake of getting along in a community?

Listen to what he says in verses 15, “For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting.” Paul understood boasting in the light of his words in 1:31, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” and in 4:7, “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” Paul contends that he has no real grounds to boasting in preaching the gospel because he was called by God – “necessity was laid upon [him].” For Paul, willingly giving up his rightful, God ordained claim to financial support was a reason to boast in the Lord. Not because of the work of giving up his rights, but because of the marvelous work that was being accomplished in his heart by Christ. He says, “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.”

Now, this seems weird. How is giving up something, especially a right that God has supposedly given to you, a reward? How often have you had make a true sacrifice, be it for your kids, a friend, a spouse, a boy/girlfriend...and prior to making the sacrifice you thought, “Man, I love to sacrifice stuff...hope I can give up more of my rights and freedoms!” So, how is it possible to deny yourself and experience reward? Consider the mother that sacrifices her career opportunities to stay at home with her children. She gets to watch them grow up and mature each and every day. She has the wonderful opportunity to cherish each special milestone in their little lives. Though at times, she may feel the sacrifice more than the reward. But as it happens, the children become adults, move out, and start their lives. Does she not consider her sacrifice to cherish those passing moments a grand reward? Consider that city group night when you’re exhausted from a long, strenuous day at work and interacting with others (perhaps you’re an introvert) and all you want to do is go home and be alone on the back patio with a good book. No talking, just time to allow your mind to unwind. BUT, instead you sacrifice that evening “stay-at-home vacation” to join your city group serving the Austin Children’s Shelter, Manchaca Apartments, or Northgate. You sacrifice your right to a quiet evening to instead talk with the child that is sitting all alone. You sacrifice that good book at home to live out the good news of the gospel in a community of the downtrodden, suffering, and hopelessness. As you talk with the child a smile of hope is birthed amidst pain of rejection. As you live out the good news of the gospel in service to a community filled with hopelessness you begin to notice people laughing, being joyful...hope is kindling! Was it worth it? Do you not consider it a great reward to see the love of Christ expressed through your sacrifice?

In the same way, Gordon Fee says, “In offering the ‘free’ gospel ‘free of charge’ [Paul’s] own ministry becomes a living paradigm of the gospel itself.” You see, in giving up his rights, Paul was not merely trying to compromise for the sake of compromise, for the sake of getting along. No, it was about something much greater than that. Recall verse 12, “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.” Are you willing to lay down your rights, freedoms, liberties...rather than allow them to become an obstacle – a stumbling block – to your brothers and sisters in Christ?

Paul redefines “rights” for the Corinthians – he urges them from the self-centered confines of individual rights defined by “what I have the right to do” *into* a communal, Christ-centered love defined by the surrendering of rights for the sake of the greater good...to be “saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” (1:2) Notice there are no exceptions...“all those who in every place”...do what? “Call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The church flourishes (as saints together) as we all call upon the Lord Jesus. Attempting to live within community, by your own strength (compromising to get along), without calling upon the name of the Lord will leave you exhausted, cynical and judgmental towards others, justifying your rights rather than being a sacrificial living paradigm of the gospel, and all of a sudden you’ve confined the Christ-centered community back into self-centered rights. In our city groups, if we aren’t first calling upon the name of the Lord it will be far too easy to start judging one another, nit-picking at your differences, getting annoyed by petty actions or words and find yourselves saying “I’m right; you’re wrong,” or “I have a right to do this or that.” But, when you look to Christ – you see unity despite perhaps diversity, you experience a love that transcends differences and disagreements, and you are able to share life filled with forgiveness and grace. You can joyfully share a meal with a brother without a glass of wine. You can give up your night of rest to serve alongside your city group. Sacrifice a new shirt to help a missions endeavor isn’t so painful anymore. Not because of your ability to compromise, but because of Christ transforming you into a living paradigm of the gospel as saints together! But, for Paul, being a living paradigm of the gospel wasn’t just about being saints together. It wasn’t simply inward focused, but it was also outward focused. It was about being saints together on gospel mission!

### **Saints Together on Gospel Mission**

He continues in verse 19, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 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. 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. 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.” (vss.19-22)

Sometimes people have confused this with, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Which basically means conform to the larger culture around you. Paul’s not saying that. Pay attention to what he says, “To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law)...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).” It was not merely about conforming or compromising to the culture around him. It was about the greater good, of being saints together *on gospel mission*. He’s saying...I can submit to these OT ceremonial laws knowing that they don’t make me righteous or holy before God. I can spend time with nonbelievers without have to be a religious prude but also knowing I have been called to imitate Christ (this is what he meant by “under the law of Christ”).

In Galatians, Paul urges the Galatian church against circumcision; yet in Acts 16 he goes with Timothy to get circumcised. Is Paul being two-faced? Duplicitous? No, he's focusing on the mission at hand: taking the gospel to a predominately Jewish culture...he knew that if Timothy were uncircumcised it would be an obstacle to their gospel mission. Hays says, "Everything that Paul does is aimed at winning as many people as possible to the gospel. He will adapt his behavior (not his message!) in whatever way necessary to achieve that end." Consider when Paul takes the gospel to Gentiles unbelievers. Paul doesn't begin to quote Old Testament Law and stories to them. What does he do? He connects the gospel to them through their poets and philosophers. He reads the inscription, "To an unknown god," and begins to share with them who the "unknown" God is! How often do we see Christians fighting with science? What if we became a living paradigm of the gospel? What would it look like for us to approach science as an opportunity for gospel mission...after all, science is ultimately man's attempt to understand creation and an unknown creative force. Paul would say, "This unknown creative force is what I proclaim to you." This was what it meant to become all things to all people. It's not about making people meet us on our level, where we are at, rather as Christ did for us, it's about meeting them with the gospel where they are.

He challenged the Corinthians to become a living paradigm of the gospel in whatever missional context they were in. What would it look like for you to be a living paradigm of the gospel at your work? Out with your college buddies? At the café you frequent? Can you give up your rights like Paul without giving up the gospel message? Can you take on a stricter code of conduct for a moment or season, knowing you are free in Christ? Can you walk in the freedom of Christ without walking outside the law of Christ? Paul can conform to the strict standard of the law, abstaining from eating meat offered to idols in one instance and then in another instance telling people it is totally okay to eat meat offered to idols. He's not being hypocritical, rather he was exemplifying a greater sacrifice that had been made! We aren't called to be compromisers of the gospel, nor are we to be phony Christians, but rather we are called to live in the freedom of the free gospel being transformed into living paradigms of the Perfect Surrendered Lord as saints together.

### **The Perfect Surrendered Lord**

Because of Christ's free, sacrificial work, we can truly care for others and be faithful to his mission, as our identities are no longer found in our rights and liberties, but in him. No longer do we have to be identified by our actions as the "weak" or the "strong." Whether that is "religious" practices like not drinking or "irreligious" acts like drinking to upset the more conservative people. Our identity is not founded in our action but in Christ's person and so we're free to pursue others for their sake, not our own selfish, self-defining purposes. This means for me as a guy with tattoos – if someone in my city group or church has a weaker conscious, and they aren't simply being divisive, I can lovingly wear a long-sleeve shirt when I'm around them...because I know what matters is not my right and freedom to have tattoos, but our call to be as saints together looking upon the perfect surrendered Lord! It means that I freely give of my time to babysit the kids while parents go to city seminary. This means that, as most all of us do here at City Life, we can enter into the fabric of our city. We can become great, hard working, successful

scientists, business professionals, political professionals, students, teachers, stay-at-home mothers, and artists...becoming all things to all people...not for the sake of cultural compromise, but for gospel mission. We faithfully, lovingly, and selflessly surrender our rights – not because of our own will power and goodness – but, because Christ first surrendered his for us. He became the epitome of sacrifice...not for his gain, but for ours!!

Jesus gave up all of his rights, freedoms, and liberties as the Son of God **unto** the cross **for** “all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Perhaps you’ve been hurt or offended by the church or your city group and you want to call it quits. Rest in the arms of Christ this morning who lovingly gave up his right to not be hurt. Perhaps you feel like you are justified in your rights and freedom this morning. Imitate Jesus who patiently and humbly denied his right to be understood and loved by all, even though he was 100% right. When we look to Christ we see true, selfless sacrifice. He lovingly came and sat at the table with the dirty, the poor, and the downtrodden when he had the right to sit at the right hand of God. He gracefully surrendered his right to retaliate against those who mocked, spat, whipped, and nailed him to a tree. He faithfully denied himself vacations and times of rest so that he could serve men, women, and little children. He denied the right to complain about his friends who abandoned him, even his best friends left him in a time greatest need. He denied himself grand riches, luxuries, and wealth beyond imagination and confined himself to the limited means of a carpenter’s household. He relinquished his right to be served and instead stooped to his weaker brothers and washed their feet. He lovely gave up his right to have stature and honor amongst the religious to knee down and lift up a prostitute into forgiveness. He laid down his right as King over all creation and become the Servant to the world.

This is why it’s Paul’s reward. It’s why he can say, “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings” (v.23). Let’s join with them in the blessing of imitating Christ – be a living paradigm of the gospel! Though we have great freedom through the gospel. Let us be challenged to give up any of our rights for the sake of being saints together on gospel mission. Share in celebration and rejoicing of the Perfect Surrendered Christ Jesus who has sacrificed all for us even unto death.”