



1 Corinthians - Chapter Nine

IV. 1 Corinthians 7:1-11:1 - Three Issues from a Corinthian Letter (continues)

IV.c 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1 - Sensitivity towards those of fragile faith (continues)

Summary of Chapter Nine

As their apostle, Paul should have been entitled to financial support for the work he was doing. He argues his case from both the perspective of the world and from Scripture. Yet he makes it clear that he does not intend to seek any reward other than that which he gets from faithfully proclaiming the Gospel.

Paul makes much of his own freedom and yet he willingly becomes a slave of the Gospel he was sent to proclaim. Paul's overall point was to make the Corinthians, and any other readers of the letter, see that Christian freedom is not freedom to do what one likes, but freedom from all the things that stops one from being the person God really wants one to be, which is freedom for the service of God and the Gospel.

IV.c.ii 1 Corinthians 9:1-27 - The Rights of an Apostle

Paul first establishes that he is an apostle to the Corinthian church. He then asserts, using examples from both the world and from the Law of Moses, that people like him have the right to be cared for by the church without having to earn a living from other means.

However, Paul is quick to state that he has never personally made use of that right nor does he intend to. He goes on to write that his purpose in life is to proclaim the Gospel and his reward is being faithful to that calling. Paul also states that he is willing to become like all the other people in order to make himself acceptable to them. This is not something that diminishes the Gospel; it is Paul's way of ensuring he makes the message available to the widest possible audience.

The section concludes with an athletic analogy to show that Christians should be prepared to train and work hard to win their rewards in advancing the Gospel.

¹ Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?
Are you not my work in the Lord?

1 Corinthians 9:1

Am I not free? Paul offers his own willingness to give up his rights for the spiritual benefit of the Corinthians. This was intended as an example that those with superior knowledge should follow.

Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Paul first encountered the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus: <<*Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'*>> (Acts 9:3-5). Other occasions when Paul was in the presence of the Lord and may have indeed seen him again include: <<*That night the Lord stood near him and said, 'Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome'*>> (Acts 23:11), <<*I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows*>> (2 Corinthians 12:2), and: <<*At my first defence no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth*>> (2 Timothy 4:16-17).

² If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 9:2

I am to you. Paul arrived in Corinth during his second missionary journey and spent 18 months with them, establishing the church. Out of all the churches that Paul had established his primary efforts went into Corinth and Ephesus in terms of time and therefore he considered them to be of special significance in terms of his apostleship to them.

You are the seal of my apostleship. A seal made of wax, clay, or various kinds of soft metal would signify either ownership or authentication. Seals in the ancient Near East were used to guarantee the quality and authenticity of a document, such as a letter, or a product such as wine. The change that Paul's preaching of the Gospel effected in the hearts of the Corinthians shows that his apostleship is genuine. Paul would later write: <<*But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment*>> (2 Corinthians 1:21-22), and: <<*You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts*>> (2 Corinthians 3:2-3), thus confirming what he wrote here.

³ This is my defence to those who would examine me.

1 Corinthians 9:3

This is my defence. Throughout his work Paul faced criticism from the Jewish authorities, the Romans and other Gentiles, i.e. those who would examine me. Although his faithfulness to God has stood the test of time and needs no defending, Paul often had to offer a defence against the accusations he faced. This was not for his personal safety but to ensure that the Gospel he proclaimed was not tarnished: <<*I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am to make my defence today against all the accusations of the Jews, because you are especially familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews; therefore I beg of you to listen to me patiently*>> (Acts 26:2-3), <<*Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves before you? We are speaking in Christ before God. Everything we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up*>> (2 Corinthians 12:19), and: <<*These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defence of the gospel*>> (Philippians 1:16).

Interestingly, there are still those today who would examine Paul in order to find fault or error in his life and teaching. Yet there are few people in history who, despite persecution and provocation, can truly match Paul's endeavour, determination and success in extending the Kingdom of God to so many different locations and people.

⁴ Do we not have the right to our food and drink? ⁵ Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?

1 Corinthians 9:4-5

Do we not have the right. Paul used the same word, Greek *exousia*, for the supposed right of the Corinthians with superior knowledge to eat meals in pagan temples. As an apostle whose primary vocation was proclaiming the Gospel and establishing churches, Paul had the right to receive material support from those churches. This right is enshrined in the words of Jesus: <<*Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food*>> (Matthew 10:9-10), and: <<*Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house*>> (Luke 10:7). Paul demonstrated this right elsewhere: <<*As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children*>> (1 Thessalonians 2:5-7), <<*This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate*>> (2 Thessalonians 3:9), and: <<*Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain', and, 'The labourer deserves to be paid'*>> (1 Timothy 5:17-18); and, if he were married, the right to travel with a believing wife.

Accompanied by a believing wife. Paul was not married but he had a high regard for marriage among ministers of the Gospel: <<*Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher*>> (1 Timothy 3:2), and: <<*I left you behind in Crete for this reason, that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you: someone who is blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious*>> (Titus 1:5-6).

Cephas was the apostle Peter, the only one of the original twelve that was definitely married when he was with Jesus, who cured Peter's mother-in-law: <<*Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once*>> (Mark 1:30).

None of the brothers of the Lord followed him prior to his resurrection: <<*For not even his brothers believed in him*>> (John 7:5). The Risen Lord appeared, however, to his brother James: <<*Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles*>> (1 Corinthians 15:7), who later became the leading figure in the Jerusalem church: <<*After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me*>> (Acts 15:13), and: <<*The next day Paul went with us to visit James; and all the elders were present*>> (Acts 21:18). Jesus also had a brother named Judas: <<*Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?*>> (Matthew 13:55), and: <<*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him*>> (Mark 6:3), who is accepted as being the same person who authored the Letter of Jude, a common form of Judas, where he referred to himself as the brother of James: <<*Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ*>> (Jude 1).

⁶ Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?

1 Corinthians 9:6

Barnabas was a Jewish Christian from the priestly tribe of Levi, a native of the island of Cyprus, and an early member of the Jerusalem church: <<*There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement')*>> (Acts 4:36). He and Paul joined forces on Paul's first missionary journey, recorded in Acts 13:1-14:28. However, there was a dispute between Paul and Barnabas over his nephew John Mark, the author of Mark's Gospel, and the two went their separate ways: <<*Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord*>> (Acts 15:37-40).

No right to refrain from working for a living. Paul is not suggesting that those serving in the church should not work hard for the material rewards they receive. He is speaking about the need for ministers to seek external employment in addition to their church work. The church should support its ministers with an appropriate living standard according to the level of commitment expected of them by the church.

⁷ Who at any time pays the expenses for doing military service? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk?

1 Corinthians 9:7

With three examples from everyday life, Paul observes the commonsense principle that those who work hard should benefit from their labour.

For doing military service. Paul uses the analogy of disciples as soldiers elsewhere: <<*Share in suffering like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday affairs; the soldier's aim is to please the enlisting officer*>> (2 Timothy 2:3-4).

Who plants a vineyard. Young men who had only recently established their vineyard were exempted from military service until they had the chance to benefit from their labours: <<*Has anyone planted a vineyard but not yet enjoyed its fruit? He should go back to his house, or he might die in the battle and another be first to enjoy its fruit*>> (Deuteronomy 20:6). King Solomon concluded that: <<*Anyone who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit, and anyone who takes care of a master will be honoured*>> (Proverbs 27:18).

⁸ Do I say this on human authority? Does not the law also say the same?

⁹ For it is written in the law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.' Is it for oxen that God is concerned?

1 Corinthians 9:8-9

Do I say this on human authority? This is a rhetorical question that should illicit a negative answer had one been required. The Gospel has brought important changes in the application of the Mosaic Law into the lives of God's people: <<*Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything*>> (1 Corinthians 7:9), but it remains God's Word and therefore continues to instruct Christians about God's character and scale of values.

You shall not muzzle an ox is a quotation from Deuteronomy 25:4. Even an animal was entitled to food while it worked. Here, Paul applied this principle to the work of evangelism and disciple-making. Paul would again quote this verse in a similar argument he made in his first pastoral epistle, see 1 Timothy 5:18.

Is it for oxen that God is concerned? This is another of Paul's rhetorical questions and his answer would no doubt have been 'No it was for his people that God gave the Law'.

¹⁰ Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake, for whoever ploughs should plough in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits?

1 Corinthians 9:10-11

It was indeed written for our sake. The Word of God was not written as an imposition but in order to enlighten and guide God's people: <<*Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead*>> (Romans 4:23-24). According to Jesus, this applied also to the ceremonial laws: <<*Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath'*>> (Mark 2:27-28).

For whoever ploughs. This is a quote from one of the wisdom books from the Jewish apocrypha, Ben Sirach 6:19. These writings were well known throughout the region at the time for the Greek philosophers looked to all cultures for additional knowledge and wisdom.

Whoever ploughs, whoever threshes. These agricultural analogies can easily transfer to different roles in the church such as evangelism and pastoral care. It does not really matter which role one is called to as long as it is fulfilled according to the calling: <<*For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps"*>> (John 4:37).

A share in the crop. The farmer deserves to receive the rewards of his labour: <<*It is the farmer who does the work who ought to have the first share of the crops*>> (2 Timothy 2:6). This is applicable to those who work in the harvest field of the world: <<*The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together*>> (John 4:36).

Reap your material benefits. Since Paul, Barnabas and others had sown spiritual good among the Corinthians, they were surely worthy of a reward; their board and lodging at least. Paul applied the same logic to the wealthier Gentile churches supporting the poor in Jerusalem, for it was from the Jews the message of salvation had come to them: <<*They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things*>> (Romans 15:27).

^{12a} If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we still more?

1 Corinthians 9:12a

Others is probably a reference to those listed in v.5 who had travelled through Corinth and received material support from that church while ministering there. Paul, Apollos, Aquila, Priscilla and others had invested significant time and energy

into the church. Therefore, Paul is posing the question as to whether that entitles them to receive still more support.

This rightful claim. In this chapter, Paul has demonstrated that any claim for material reward would be legal and just (v.15 and v.18).

Anyone reading this letter might easily have been expecting Paul to now say 'It is time for you to start paying me!' That was not in Paul's mind. He was laying down a principle that was for that generation and the generations to come. A call for them to honour and support those called to bring the Gospel to them. After all, if believers take the principles of tithing seriously then any church with ten people receiving an income could support a minister at their own equivalent average wage!

^{12b} 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 what is sacrificed on the altar? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

1 Corinthians 9:12b-14

We have not made use of this right. Although Paul has only named Barnabas in this part of the letter, there were others working in his team, including Timothy, who were not seeking financial reward for their work.

Those who are employed in the temple service were the priests and Levites. The priests were permitted to eat what remained from the holy sacrifices on the altar in the Temple: <<Every male among the priests shall eat of it; it shall be eaten in a holy place; it is most holy>> (Leviticus 7:6). It was also ordained that they would receive their due reward from the people: <<If a Levite leaves any of your towns, from wherever he has been residing in Israel, and comes to the place that the Lord will choose (and he may come whenever he wishes), then he may minister in the name of the Lord his God, like all his fellow-Levites who stand to minister there before the Lord. They shall have equal portions to eat, even though they have income from the sale of family possessions>> (Deuteronomy 18:6-8). In Chapters 3 and 6, Paul had made the link between the old Temple ordinances and the Christian now being the temple. Thus those serving in the temple should be cared for, not by legal right but through grace.

The Lord commanded refers to the occasions that Jesus had stated that labourers deserve their wages. These passages were quoted in comments made on vv.4-5.

¹⁵ But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case. Indeed, I would rather die than that – no one will deprive me of my ground for boasting!

1 Corinthians 9:15

I have made no use. Paul occasionally did receive material support from churches for his proclamation of the Gospel: <<*In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God*>> (Philippians 4:14-18), but he appears never to have received such support from the Christians in the immediate geographical location in which he was working at any given time: <<*Did I commit a sin by humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I proclaimed God's good news to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you*>> (2 Corinthians 11:7-8).

My ground for boasting. Paul uses this word not in its usual sense of pride that steals glory from God: <<*God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God*>> (1 Corinthians 1:28-29), but rather as expressing a rightful sense of joy and fulfilment in what God has done through him, for example: <<*When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles*>> (Acts 14:27), <<*In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ*>> (Romans 15:17-19), <<*For we write to you nothing other than what you can read and also understand; I hope you will understand until the end – as you have already understood us in part – that on the day of the Lord Jesus we are your boast even as you are our boast*>> (2 Corinthians 1:13-14), <<*Look at what is before your eyes. If you are confident that you belong to Christ, remind yourself of this, that just as you belong to Christ, so also do we. Now, even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it*>> (2 Corinthians 10:7-8), <<*All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbour's work, will become a cause for pride*>> (Galatians 6:4), <<*It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labour in vain*>> (Philippians 2:16), and: <<*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing*>> (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

¹⁶ If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe betide me if I do not proclaim the gospel!

1 Corinthians 9:16

An obligation is laid on me. Paul had received his instructions through the Lord while in Damascus: <<***But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do***>> (Acts 9:6).

Woe betide me if I do not proclaim the Gospel! Paul was proclaiming the Gospel for free, guarding this as a privilege, and he would rather have died than have it any other way! The reason why Paul did not wish to be paid was not stubbornness, nor was he being ineffective by working as a tentmaker in addition to his work for the church. He was setting an example and laying a foundational principle for the global church to follow.

Another key point for Paul was that he wanted to show there was a clear distinction between someone called to serve the church of Jesus Christ and the itinerant teachers of wisdom, sophistry and rhetoric, who expected to make a good living from speaking to the people. Those who showed a special interest in their teaching were then invited to have private lessons that were expensive. Paul is demonstrating that the Gospel is for all people and not just for those who could afford to pay for it! There is no way to buy a place in the Kingdom: <<***Truly, no ransom avails for one's life, there is no price one can give to God for it. For the ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice, that one should live on for ever and never see the grave***>> (Psalm 49:7-9).

¹⁷ For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission.

1 Corinthians 9:17

I do this of my own will. Paul had many opportunities in his life to turn away from God, or back to God through his Pharisaic ideals. This would have saved him a lot of hardship and persecution. Yet he has demonstrated that when given the choice to serve or not to serve, the free will choice should always be the former.

This statement by Paul should also be taken as a warning that it is not a person's own will that determines they should serve in ministry. It is only for those called by God and given the appropriate gifts to do so.

I have a reward. As a Pharisaic Jew, Paul had always sought to serve God, even to the point of persecuting the church: <<***Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem***>> (Acts 9:1-2), and: <<***For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God***>> (1 Corinthians 15:9). Yet Jesus had reached out in love to Paul, forgiven him and corrected him of his misguided understanding. To Paul, as it should be to all who have found Christ, this was more than sufficient reward for any service he could then provide: <<***For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in***>>

me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me>> (Galatians 2:19-20).

I am entrusted with a commission or stewardship. This term, Greek *oikonomia*, refers to the responsibility of managing a household. Paul uses it metaphorically to say that God has entrusted him with a responsibility to which he must be faithful, whether he benefits from it materially or not. That responsibility is to proclaim the Gospel and share its blessings (v.23). Paul wrote again on this issue: <<*This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles – for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given to me for you>> (Ephesians 3:1-2).*

¹⁸ What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

1 Corinthians 9:18

Free of charge. Paul preached the Gospel in urban centres where itinerant orators were a common sight. Some of them openly used their rhetorical skills to seek fame and fortune. Other more philosophically inclined teachers proclaimed self-discipline and verbally despised the world but sometimes actually pocketed large sums from their followers as they moved from town to town. Paul sought to distinguish himself from such preachers: <<*For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed>> (1 Thessalonians 2:3-5), and: <<*You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was towards you believers>> (1 Thessalonians 2:9-10).**

It is recorded elsewhere that Paul resorted to manual labour to set an example of hard work for new Christians, some of whom had a tendency to take advantage of the charitable impulses of the larger group: <<*But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you>> (1 Thessalonians 4:10b-11), <<*And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them>> (1 Thessalonians 5:14), and: <<*Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate>> (2 Thessalonians 3:6-9).***

¹⁹ For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them.

1 Corinthians 9:19

I have made myself a slave to all. Paul was as free as any man could be in the 1st Century. He was identified as being one of God's chosen people for he was a Jew. He had extensive rights because he was a Roman citizen: <<*The tribune answered, 'It cost me a large sum of money to get my citizenship.'* Paul said, '*But I was born a citizen*'>> (Acts 22:28). Indeed, he had privileged status in the empire being born in the city of Tarsus: <<*Paul replied, 'I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city; I beg you, let me speak to the people'*>> (Acts 21:39). Most importantly Paul was now free in Christ Jesus. It was this freedom that allowed him to become a slave, knowing that he owed a debt to God for his salvation, one that he could never repay and, in fact, was not required to due to grace.

Paul's logic is clear. He is Jesus' slave: <<*For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ*>> (1 Corinthians 7:22), and **Jesus was the suffering servant:** <<*Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper*>> (Isaiah 53:10), and: <<*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many*>> (Mark 10:45). Therefore Paul became a slave to all of God's people.

It should also be noted that the Corinthians would have considered themselves free as well. They too were Roman citizens but with the special privilege of living in a designated 'free' city; that is, they had a certain amount of political and economic freedom that did not exist in many parts of the empire. Those who had come to Jesus through Judaism were now free from the law and all Christians were taught of their freedom from guilt, shame and sin. Could they therefore do as they please? With rights there come responsibilities!

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 I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law.

1 Corinthians 9:20

I became as a Jew. Paul was a Jew, a devout Pharisee in fact, and valued his Jewish heritage: <<*For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen*>> (Romans 9:3-5), but the Jewish Messiah himself had nullified the distinctively Jewish parts of the Mosaic Law: <<*it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what*

comes out of the mouth that defiles>> (Matthew 15:11), and: <<*For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace*>> (Ephesians 2:14-15). In Christ, God had created a newly defined people where there was no distinction between Jew and Gentile: <<*And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us*>> (Acts 15:8-9), and: <<*For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him*>> (Romans 10:12).

Paul would not have made such a statement if he had simply viewed Christianity as a sub-branch of Judaism. It was something completely new, the fulfilment of what God had promised in the OT, but which was no longer bound by ethnic or geographical identity.

Became as one under the law. Paul was willing to adopt the Jewish way of life temporarily, including attending the local synagogues, in order to gain a hearing among Jews: <<*Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek*>> (Acts 16:3), <<*Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having purified himself, he entered the temple with them, making public the completion of the days of purification when the sacrifice would be made for each of them*>> (Acts 21:26), but his ethnicity no longer defined his existence: <<*For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh*>> (Philippians 3:3).

Though I myself am not under the law. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus had abolished much of the ceremonial law and Paul, a Jew, was released from its restrictions through his acceptance of Christ. Yet he had been willing to observe the Sabbath and dietary food laws in order to maintain his standing within the Jewish community, in order that he might win those under the law.

²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law.

1 Corinthians 9:21

To those outside the law means outside the Mosaic Law which had defined the Jewish way of life since the time of Moses. This refers to the Gentiles that Paul brought the Gospel to.

Not free from God's law, Christ's law. Paul seems to distinguish between the Jewish law and something he calls alternately: <<*the commandments of God*>> in 1 Corinthians 7:19, and the law of Christ, which is of continuing validity for Christians, whatever their ethnicity. This second law appears to include the ethical teaching of Jesus as well as absorbing both the theological structure and many of the moral precepts of the Mosaic Law: <<*What then should we say? That the law*>>
New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised 1Corinthians9-12

is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'>> (Romans 7:7), <<For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'>> (Galatians 5:14), and: <<'Honour your father and mother' – this is the first commandment with a promise>> (Ephesians 6:2).

Christ's law today would also include the moral commandments of the NT epistles, since in them the apostles interpreted and applied Christ's life and teachings to the NT churches.

²² To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

1 Corinthians 9:22-23

To the weak I became weak. This is the attitude that Paul wants those in Corinth with superior knowledge or strong consciences to adopt towards the weak in their midst. He does not want them to get into debates about who is right or wrong on the issues that divide them: <<**Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions**>> (Romans 14:1). Refer to 1 Corinthians 8:9-13.

I have become all things to all people. Paul's rights and his freedoms are as nothing; what matters is whether people are being won for God, being saved from the corrupting wickedness around and within them, being rescued from darkness and brought into the light. This statement has sometimes been understood as though it meant that Paul was a mere pragmatist, a spin-doctor, twisting his message this way and that to suit different audiences. That is not what he is saying. The message remains constant. It is the messenger who must swallow his pride, who must give up his rights, who must change his freedom into slavery. Woe betide those who trim the message so that they do not have to trim themselves. That would be considered hypocrisy.

I might by any means save some. In the last few verses Paul has made five separate statements about winning people; that is, getting them to believe in the Gospel. Here, he explicitly writes save for that is the ultimate gift of God to those who do accept the message of his Son.

The word save is used not with regard to the winning of a prize, but of making significant profit on an investment. God has invested everything in the Gospel, including his own very self in the person of Jesus his son. Now he wants to gain something back from it, namely the people of all sorts and conditions whose lives will be won through the Gospel.

I do it all for the sake of the gospel. Paul had only one overarching ambition. That was to faithfully fulfil his calling by Jesus to take the Gospel message to all who would listen to him and be impacted by what they heard from him.

Share in its blessings. Paul realised, and so should all other believers, that suffering is part of life. This should not diminish the superiority of the promises of life that are given to those who follow Jesus, for there are blessings in this life and in an age yet to come.

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. ²⁵ Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; ²⁷ but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

In a race the runners all compete. Paul frequently uses athletic metaphors to describe the rigors and single-minded focus of his apostolic work to pursue the advancement of the Gospel: <<*Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus*>> (Philippians 3:12-14), and: <<*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing*>> (2 Timothy 4:7-8). The extended metaphor is particularly apt in a letter to Corinth, which was the location of the biennial Isthmian Games, at the time second in fame only to the Olympic Games. Paul's stay in Corinth during his second missionary journey, refer to Acts Chapter 18, may have overlapped with the games in either AD49 or AD51.

A perishable garland was a crown, Greek *stephanos*, of foliage, and therefore quick to wither, which was given to the victor in a public athletic contest. Paul thinks of his congregations as the victor's crown that he will wear on the final day: <<*Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved*>> (Philippians 4:1), and: <<*For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?*>> (1 Thessalonians 2:19).

We an imperishable one. This crown or garland alludes to the ultimate prize which is the renewal of creation, the conquest over and the final abolition of death itself. Paul believes that the Christian life can achieve this in the present age, if only in part.

The concept of a crown as the reward for faithful service is used on several occasions in the NT: <<*From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing*>> (2 Timothy 4:8), <<*Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has*

stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him>> (James 1:12), <<And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away>> (1 Peter 5:4), <<Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life>> (Revelation 2:10), and: <<I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown>> (Revelation 3:11).

I do not run aimlessly. Like an athlete, Paul has a single-minded goal: to bring as many people as possible, from whatever station in life, to faith in the Gospel (vv.19-23). Likewise, he does not wish to waste energy by putting effort into punches that are simply beating the air; that is, having no effect. Paul could already envision a church where people were making a lot of fuss over issues that interested them without being prepared to put in the hard work to advance the Kingdom of God, either in their own lives or their communities.

Verse 27 has a long history of misinterpretation in terms of punishing one's own body as a means of spiritual discipline. Paul's language, however, is governed both by the athletic metaphor of the previous two verses and by the physical demands of his apostolic work: *<<You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully maltreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition>> (1 Thessalonians 2:1-2).* Just as an athlete goes through physical training that is sometimes uncomfortable in order to attain the goal of victory, so Paul endures physical and emotional hardship, and gives up his right to material support, for the Gospel's advancement. Refer to v.12 and 2 Corinthians 6:1-10.

I punish my body and enslave it. Paul has been building up to this point. The Gospel will demand that believers must be prepared to give up some of their rights and freedoms, even if this feels like they are going into hard, athletic training.

Disqualified is the Greek word *adokimos*, which also means 'not approved' or 'not standing the test'. In this context it means 'disqualified from receiving rewards'.