

WHERE WE ARE HEADED

Having addressed the issue of “food offered to idols” raised by the Corinthians in chapter 8, Paul adds to the discussion another example of foregoing one’s rights for a greater good. And here he turns to himself as an example.

It is not that he is vaunting himself, but the way that he laid aside certain rights as an apostle so as to more freely preach the Gospel is a good example of what he is inviting the Corinthians to consider.

WALKING THROUGH THE DISCUSSION

Most people have learned that there are times in life when we make sacrifices—when we set aside what we think we deserve or what rights we might have for some greater good. In little ways we experience it—when we set aside the “right” to eat what we want for the sake of our waist line. Or in bigger ways like making sacrifices about where we will live or work for the sake of our family.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 8, Paul spoke to the Corinthians about setting aside rights for the good of another. There, he wrote about the freedom a Christian has to eat food sacrificed to idols (because “an idol has no real existence,” 8:4, ESV). But he went on to argue that because all those in Corinth—even among the believing community—don’t fully grasp this truth that one’s exercise of that freedom to eat might rightly be curtailed if it causes another to “stumble” (8:9-13). Rights are held (and insisted upon) loosely, deferring to what is loving and wise and beneficial in the given situation.

When we turn to chapter 9, Paul is going to advance that line of thinking by calling on his own practice as a model, an example. And where is the example seen? In Paul’s “freedom” to *not* enjoin all his “rights” as an apostle.

Apparently some in Corinth had concluded that Paul was just a second-rate apostle. (You might recall how they were pitting one teacher against another as described in chapter 1 of this letter.) And part of that evaluation of Paul might have come on the basis of his refusal to receive money from the Corinthians when he was there (as described in Acts 18). Some were concluding that Paul wasn’t a “real apostle” because he wasn’t living the way that they thought an apostle should live. Specifically, he wasn’t “making his living” through his apostleship.

In those days, a prominent “orator” would make his living either through having patrons who supported him, or by receiving offerings from those he spoke to, or by teaching others (for a fee) to speak the way he did. And this thinking was being carried over into the church. The thought was that if one was “really” an apostle or a great teacher or evangelist,

one should be making his living through that work. But Paul hadn’t done any of these things. And, apparently, some in Corinth used the lack of “support” to reason Paul must not really be a true apostle, since he still had to work to support himself.

Paul wants them to know that he could well have exercised this right, but chose not to. That he didn’t exercise such a right does not necessarily drive to the conclusion that he wasn’t a true apostle. He offers to them the real proof of his apostleship: Their own changed lives through the ministry the Spirit wrought in them through him. And in this way his living among them illustrates the point he is hoping to make: He relinquished his rights.

The arguments or ideas in chapter 8 and chapter 9 do overlap. Paul’s point in chapter 8 is “It might be best to refrain from exercising certain of your rights if it causes another weaker brother or sister to stumble.” But that idea of the “weaker brother” is seemingly absent from chapter nine. There, the idea seems to be “It might be best to refrain from exercising my right to make my living from the Gospel.” What connects these two? The idea that there is something greater than “my rights.”

Whether it is the right to eat meat (in chapter 8) or the right to receive from the Corinthians (in chapter 9) the idea is that there are times when it would be better to let go of certain rights because there is something one wants more, there is something more to be valued than one’s individual rights. In chapter 8, what is to be wanted more is loving, edifying relationships. In chapter 9, what is wanted more is a freedom to preach the Gospel without the concern of who might or might not support the work.

In other words, the right thing to do might be to suspend pursuing one’s personal rights for some greater good.

It might be possible for some to dismiss Paul’s thoughts here because they conclude that, since they are not “apostles,” Paul’s point is lost on them. But this doesn’t have to be the case.

All of us have “callings”; we do what we do by Christ’s design. And with each calling there are perceived “rights.” In marriage it might be the “right” for my spouse to do this or that particular thing. In business it might be the “right” to be treated a certain way. But there could well be times when insisting on one’s rights will end up moving things in the wrong direction. (Just think about how insisting on getting “what you deserve” in your marriage hinders the deepening of the relationship!) So, there are ways to think of rights and responsibilities, freedom and relinquishing the exercise of freedoms, because what matters more to us is something beyond getting “our rights.”

We will be
looking at 1
Corinthians
8:1-13

INITIAL THOUGHTS

Everyone makes sacrifices in one way or another. If you want to lose weight, there are sacrifices to make; if you want your kids in a certain school, there are sacrifices to make. When it comes to making the normal kinds of sacrifices we all face, how do you decide what to sacrifice? What guides your thinking?

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

Paul has made the case, in chapter 8, that simply having the “right” to do something doesn’t mean that it is the right thing to do. There will be times that rights might be sacrificed out of love and regard for another. To further make the point, Paul offers his own life choices as an example.

What kinds of “rights” does Paul say he did not exercise? What privileges does he pass by?

Are these rights he relinquished legitimate? That is, are they appropriate privileges he could well have enjoyed? Why or why not?

In talking about what he relinquished, is Paul hoping to cause the Corinthians to feel sorry for him, to pity him? Why or why not?

Paul did not relinquish such rights in order to keep a “weaker brother from stumbling” (as he talked about in chapter 8). That being true, what is the reason that Paul relinquished certain rights as you see him describe it in chapter 9?

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO LIFE

Although no one has the same apostolic call that Paul did, his example can still be of help to us. How does understanding his relinquishing his rights to financial support help you see where and how you might relinquish your rights for some greater good?

What relationships or situation are you currently in that could be improved if you decide that you would forego your rights for a great good?

*We will be
looking at 1
Corinthians
9:1-18*

INITIAL THOUGHTS

Everyone makes sacrifices in one way or another. If you want to lose weight, there are sacrifices to make; if you want your kids in a certain school, there are sacrifices to make. When it comes to making the normal kinds of sacrifices we all face, how do you decide what to sacrifice? What guides your thinking?

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

Paul has made the case, in chapter 8, that simply having the “right” to do something doesn’t mean that it is the right thing to do. There will be times that rights might be sacrificed out of love and regard for another. To further make the point, Paul offers his own life choices as an example.

What kinds of “rights” does Paul say he did not exercise? What privileges does he pass by?

Are these rights he relinquished legitimate? That is, are they appropriate privileges he could well have enjoyed? Why or why not?

In talking about what he relinquished, is Paul hoping to cause the Corinthians to feel sorry for him, to pity him? Why or why not?

Paul did not relinquish such rights in order to keep a “weaker brother from stumbling” (as he talked about in chapter 8). That being true, what is the reason that Paul relinquished certain rights as you see him describe it in chapter 9?

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO LIFE

Although no one has the same apostolic call that Paul did, his example can still be of help to us. How does understanding his relinquishing his rights to financial support help you see where and how you might relinquish your rights for some greater good?

What relationships or situation are you currently in that could be improved if you decide that you would forego your rights for a great good?

*We will be
looking at 1
Corinthians
9:1-18*