



Rev. Frank Wang
1 Corinthians 9:1-18

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English Standard Version

“Cross Word: Surrender”

The 14th Sermon in the series on 1 Corinthians entitled
Cross Words

Good morning, and since this is the first Sunday of 2018, Happy New Year! If you are here with us for the first time, I'd like to welcome you to Potomac Hills. I'm Frank Wang, and I'm one of the pastors here. Please, if you're new, stick around long enough for one of the pastors to meet you. I promise, we don't bite.

Alright, let us turn our attention to the Word of God. Our passage today is 1 Corinthians 9:1-18. As you're turning there in your Bibles or finding it on your phones, I want to remind you that we've been in 1 Corinthians since September or so. We took a break from this series to spend some time in the Minor Prophets for the Christmas season. But now we're back. And if you recall, we're dealing with a letter that was written to a church living in a similar context to our own. Corinth was a bustling economic hub in ancient Greece, and it was also a crossroads for the world. People from all over would ply their trade in Corinth, and so it was a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic center of power, money, and culture. Not too different from the DMV.

Today's passage comes hot on the heels of a discussion about eating food sacrificed to idols, and for those of you that heard the last sermon on 1 Corinthians, you might remember that the Corinthians had missed the point of their salvation in Christ. It wasn't about freeing them up to do whatever they wanted, but to transform their loves. As Christians they are to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love their neighbor as themselves. Sure they had freedoms and rights that they were entitled to exercise, but the principle is that love for Jesus and their brothers and sisters in Christ trumps all that.

And so today, we come to 1 Corinthians 9:1-18. In this passage, Paul demonstrates that chapter 8 is not only for the Corinthians, but is a principle that he himself lives by. Today, we get to see Paul put his money where his mouth is.¹

So, please follow along carefully, paying attention, for this is the Word of the Lord.

¹Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? ²If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

³This is my defense to those who would examine me. ⁴Do we not have the right to eat and drink? ⁵Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? ⁷Who 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?

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

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. ¹³Do 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? ¹⁴In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

¹⁵But 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. ¹⁶For 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! ¹⁷For 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. ¹⁸What 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.

Let's pray.

I was talking to a young couple once about car buying. They were on a tight budget, and they were looking for a cheap car that would see them through to better financial days. The problem was that because of their budget, they were looking at cars that didn't give them the warm fuzzies in the reliability department. The principle of “if it's selling for that cheap, there's probably something wrong with it” was giving them the heebie-jeebies' about going in on a car.

¹ The background and exposition of this text is adapted from the sermons Money and Ministry (9/3/17) and Necessity is Laid Upon Me (9/10/17) by David Strain; and from the commentaries First Corinthians by Kim Riddlebarger, pp. 211-218, 1 Corinthians by Simon J. Kistemaker, pp. 284-303, 1 Corinthians by Anthony C. Thiselton, pp. 136-142, The Cross and Christian Ministry by D.A. Carson, pp. 125-128; and from an excerpt of 131 Christians Everyone Should Know which can be found at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/missionaries/hudson-taylor.html>

And that's probably wise. We often look at the price-tag and infer something about the quality of whatever we're buying. For instance, a \$1000 car from Craigslist is probably not going to last as long as a \$30,000 car from a dealership. Sure, you might get lucky and score an incredible deal on an awesome car for that \$1000, but the odds are much better that you're going to get burned instead.

And this principle helps us understand the context of what Paul's responding to in this passage. The Corinthians are questioning Paul's ministry and even his apostleship. In verse 3, we see that Paul has to give a defense of his apostleship, and so you can imagine the Corinthians applying this economic rule-of-thumb to Paul's ministry in Corinth. Down in verses 12, 15, and 18, we see that Paul didn't take any kind of compensation from the Corinthian church for his pastoral work among them. We could turn over to Acts 18 to see that Paul stayed with Aquila and his wife Priscilla because they shared the same trade skills, namely making tents. This is why we call bi-vocational pastors "tentmakers", by the way. And so, Paul's ministry didn't cost the Corinthians a thing. From the Corinthian point of view, Paul's free-of-charge ministry didn't quite fit their expectations. Greeks in that day would have had a very low opinion of manual labor. The leaders of the community and elite wouldn't have dreamed of doing a blue-collar job like tent-making. And so the logic goes "If Paul acts like a low-class person by working for a living, his teaching is probably low-class too." His credibility took another hit since he refused to take compensation. What kind of crazy person turns down money?

But it goes further than that. There's a certain way of doing business when it comes to Paul's line of work. Itinerant teachers, orators, and public speakers depended upon securing the support of patrons. These wealthy people would have had the resources to provide housing and a decent wage to these speakers. But there's no such thing as a "free lunch". There were expectations that came with being in these patrons' employ. A shout-out here, a good word there for the patron's position or agenda. In short, these patrons were the money and influence behind the speakers. The patrons were really the ones in control of the speaker's message. And obviously this arrangement is unacceptable to Paul. And so he refused to play the game.

It's no wonder that the Corinthians had doubts about Paul. "He is doing it all wrong, and so his ministry probably isn't worth what we paid for it, which was nothing at all. What kind of apostle was Paul? Probably not a very good one!" And it's to these thoughts that Paul writes this passage. We get it in 3 parts. The first part is Paul's Response, which is found in verses 1-3. The second part deals with Paul's Rights in verses 4-14. The third part is Paul's Renunciation in verses 15-18. For you kids that have no idea what the word "renunciation" means, it's basically a word that starts with the letter "R" that means to "give up something".

I. Paul's Response

So first, Paul's response which we find in verses 1-3. *Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? 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 is my defense to those who would examine me.* These verses give us two arguments in Paul's defense. The first is that he's an apostle and that he's seen Jesus our lord. But, Paul is not one of the twelve disciples. He wasn't with Jesus throughout Jesus' earthly ministry. He clearly doesn't have the credentials that someone like Peter did, and on top of that, he was a persecuter of the church. So what does Paul have going for him? Well, that he has seen the resurrected Jesus. The defining characteristic of apostles is that they are witnesses to Jesus's resurrection. And the Corinthians could scarcely have doubted the fact that Paul had met the Lord Jesus. After all, Jesus appeared in his resurrection glory to Paul on the road to Damascus. We can find

the account of it in Acts 9. It was then that Paul became a Christian and received his call to be the apostle to the Gentiles. But Paul's conversion story is not even the most convincing of proofs. That would be the Corinthians themselves.

Paul's last rhetorical question, "Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?", points out the great irony of the Corinthian Christians questioning his apostolic authority. The very fact that they are Christians in the first place is proof of the genuineness of his ministry. Remember, Paul founded that church. He is the one that sowed the seeds of faith in them. And so Paul was saying, "You want proof that I'm the real thing? Look at the lives that have been changed! That transformation is not something that I could have done. It could have only been done by God through me. And so you. You are the seal, the proof, of my apostleship." Paul is pointing to the fruit of his ministry as proof of his faithfulness. And we do this all the time. We look to the fruits of our labor to judge the labor itself. For instance, we have a couple of rocket scientists in the room. If the rocket that they launch blows up midway through launch, they can safely say that something messed up. And since it's their job to make sure nothing messes up, somebody along the way was not fully faithful in acquitting their job completely. Paul is saying the same. "You want to judge my ministry? Fine. Look at the fruit of my labor among you."

II. Paul's Rights

But now that he has responded to whether or not he has genuine spiritual authority, there's still the issue of the money. What is motivating Paul to refuse compensation? Is it the very idea of being paid to preach the Gospel? – "God forbid I get paid for preaching! That's just wrong!" – Or is it something else? And Paul is quick to build a case that it's something else. While Paul was personally unwilling to take money from the Corinthians, he didn't want them to get the wrong idea. It is right for them to support their ministers. But, Paul wants them to go through his decision-making process with him. So they need to be on the same page and start in the same place. And so Paul starts with what his rights are. In verses 4-14, Paul wanted to remind them of his right to be compensated. Look how quickly he claims his rights in verses 4-6. *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? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?*

Paul begins by driving home the point that he has the same rights as all the other apostles. And isn't it interesting that he intentionally name drops Cephas? Cephas is Peter in Aramaic. Peter was clearly an apostle, nobody would dispute that. And how is he treated by the Corinthian Church? The Corinthian church wouldn't have thought twice about caring for Peter's needs, and even bearing the extra burden of paying his wife's way too. The implications here are stark. It'd be like Potomac Hills pulling out the red carpet for Tim Keller, but then turning around and telling Dave Silvernail that his ministry isn't worth a dime. That's ridiculous. They're both pastors. They're both preaching the Gospel. And if anything, we should care far more about Dave than Tim because Dave has been here 20 years to walk alongside us. Some of us owe our faith to him, and most of us owe, in part, our continued faithfulness to the Lord to Dave's ministry. Paul has the same rights as all the other apostles, including the right to be compensated for his spiritual work among them. And of course I'd be remiss if I didn't take the opportunity to make fun of pastors from verse 6. "Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?" I get the question, "What do you do all day?", all the time. For many of you, there's this lurking suspicion that we pastors do absolutely nothing during the week, and behold, Paul has confirmed your suspicions by saying that he has a right to refrain from working for a living. Now obviously Paul isn't saying that pastors have a life of idleness

and ease. He's saying that pastors ought to devote themselves wholly to the work of the ministry, and that churches ought to support them in such a way as to make that possible.

But, Paul doesn't stop there with his argument that he has a right to be paid. In verse 7, he uses the analogy of other professions. He points out other workers deserve the wages. Soldiers, vintners, and shepherds all are compensated for their labor. It'd be unthinkable to refuse to pay them. Pastors are no different.

Paul continues by citing Deuteronomy 25:4. "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." The principle of paying your workers is so universal that it even applies to animals. Oxen were allowed to eat some of the grain as it did the heavy work of plowing or milling. And so Paul says, "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 the crop." Like oxen who serve their masters, ministers also labor for the church as they serve the Lord Jesus. And the implication is that you would care for your oxen, who serve you so well and labor so hard for you, how much more should you care for the people who labor for your sanctification!

Paul continues to pile on in verse 11. "If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?" Think about the eternal value of salvation. Paul was the one through whom the Holy Spirit sowed the seeds of the Corinthians' faith. Is it too much to ask for them to materially care for his needs?

And if we skip down to verse 13, we see that this was a normal practice for those doing religious work. Back in the Old Testament, when the tribes of Israel were receiving portions of the promised land as an inheritance, the tribe of Levi received nothing for they were to be the priests. The provision of the tithe, and obligatory compensation for the spiritual work they were doing, was set up to provide for the Levites' needs.

It all comes to a close in verse 14. "In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the Gospel should get their living by the Gospel." That simple principle is what you're giving to. You know, I'll be the first to say that I really dislike talking about money in the church. It just makes me uncomfortable. I'll bet that many of you are either sick of hearing about money since we've been talking about it a lot, or just don't like the topic to begin with. But here's what we need to understand when we talk about money in the church. It's about providing for Gospel work. It's about keeping missionaries in the field, bringing the Gospel to those who have never heard it. It's about caring for your pastors who faithfully preach the Gospel to you both in the good times and in the hard times. It's about giving to see the banner of Christ advance.

III. Paul's Renunciation

And so Paul has both established his authority as an apostle and spent a ton of time insisting upon his right to be compensated. But we still haven't figured out why Paul is renouncing his rights. It's pretty strange. Think about it. Paul is paying a heavy price for renouncing his right to compensation. It's not just the lost wages either. Think about the fact that he has to spend time and energy doing the manual labor of a tent-maker. That could be time spent doing Gospel work. He's also getting criticized for doing work that is supposedly beneath him, which is not only personally difficult, but it also puts the message that he preaches at a disadvantage. So why? We speculated that it was to be sure to avoid being beholden to wealthy patrons, but that's just speculation. What does Paul say about why he renounces his rights? Let's look at verses 12 and 15-18. Starting mid-way through 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.” And 15-18, “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. 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! 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. 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.”

So we get two reasons why Paul gave up his right to compensation. The first is more general, and the second more personal. So first, in verse 12. Paul gave up his right to compensation was so that he did not put an obstacle in the way of the Gospel. From his perspective, taking payment for his ministry work would have been detrimental to, as D.A. Carson puts it, “to the integrity of his and the credibility of the Gospel”.² Taking money from the wealthy could have put the Gospel message in a subordinate position to the patron’s agenda. And it could also have aligned the Gospel with the wealthy or the “strong”, making it undesirable to the weak or the poor. And this harkens back to chapter 8, where Paul says that the Corinthians should take care that the right to eat meat sacrificed to idols does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. Because he has brothers that have weak consciences that will be tempted to sin because of the exercise of his freedom, he renounces his right to eat meat for their sake. Paul is far more concerned about the faith of his brothers and sisters in Christ and the increase of the Gospel in their lives than about one of his rights.

Now what about the second reason? It comes in the difficult section about grounds for boasting, having necessity laid on him, and rewards. And to be honest, I had a hard time with this, and so I really thank the Lord for the ministry of D.A. Carson who made this much more clear to me. Paul has a unique situation. For the other apostles, there is some sense in which they are volunteers. They all were called by Jesus himself and made decisions to follow him. They traveled with Jesus, and they had their convictions cemented by the events of the cross, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost. But Paul was different. Paul was a persecutor of the church. He didn’t follow Jesus during his ministry. He was part of the establishment that Jesus antagonized so frequently. Paul’s salvation and call to ministry came in one wildly intense encounter with the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus. It was a revelation that utterly transformed Paul. Paul didn’t really sign up to do ministry, but was captured by the Lord and pressed into service. Carson notes that for Paul, preaching the Gospel and his salvation come together. And so that’s why we get this talk about a necessity being laid upon him. Paul can do nothing else but proclaim the Gospel. Could no sooner walk away from preaching than walk away from his salvation. This is why he pulls out the Old Testament language of “Woe to me”. It’d be like agony to not preach. And so the calculus works something like this. Preaching in itself is a reward for I get to be involved in the Lord’s work in your life. But for Paul, he’s simply doing what he’s been told to do. He’s simply has no say in whether or not he will preach. And so there isn’t anything commendable or even rewarding about simply preaching.

And so this brings us to the last verse. What then is Paul’s reward? And here Carson blew my mind. He wrote, “If [Paul’s] preaching does not prove his wholehearted, voluntary commitment to the task (since he really has no choice in the matter, short of trying to walk away from the gospel altogether), how can he show that his heart and soul are in this ministry? What element in his ministry proves that the **grace** of God has captured his heart and will, and that his

² Carson, 127

actions bring the rewards of God with them? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.”³ This is crazy. Paul was so determined to prove to himself, the Lord, and everyone watching that he was wholeheartedly, happily, and voluntarily committed to the preaching of the Gospel, that he gave up his right to compensation while also burdening himself greatly. It cost him time, energy, and constant misunderstandings to do this. And by doing this, he models the freedom in Christ that he has not only to exercise his rights, but also to lay them down.

This is radical. We live in a culture that prides itself in claiming and defending rights. Some people would rather die than give up some of their rights, and here Paul is saying the exact opposite: He would rather die than not give up this right to work for free. Paul is so hung up on spreading the Gospel that he thinks nothing about the personal cost. He will do anything to see the fame of Christ increase. He will do anything to remove obstacles to the Gospel. And this is challenging for us, especially for your pastors. For me, am I a preacher who can do nothing else other than preach the Word, and be nothing else other than a servant of the Word? Has the Gospel so captured your attention, your hearts, and your affections that you would go to the lengths that Paul went to in order for the Gospel to advance? Are we willing to surrender our rights for the sake of demonstrating a radical, generous, forgiving love to those around us? Are we willing to sacrifice ease, reputation, and money for the sake of seeing the Gospel presented to those who do not call Jesus Lord and Savior? I would wager that this is the reason why the church has been a punching bag to mainstream culture. It’s not that we are radical about abortion or marriage, but because we aren’t radical enough about doing whatever it takes for the full-bodied, multi-faceted **Gospel** to be displayed and advanced.

If we stopped there, there’d be quite the weight upon each of us to do better. But we’re not about guilt tripping or legalism. There’s only one reason why Paul can do what he did. There’s only one reason why we can be a people who sacrifice deeply and go all-in for Christ. It’s the same reason from the last time that we were in 1 Corinthians. It’s that it’s already been done for us. Think about it. Philippians 2:6-8 says “*Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but **emptied himself** (or you could say, laid down his right to be honored and glorified at all times), by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*” That death, a renunciation of the right to life itself, is at the core of what we hope in. That’s the Gospel. If you’re new to the church and to Christianity, I want to tell you that this is what we are all about. Jesus gave up his very life for you, a sinner. We’re all screw ups here. There’s not a one of us that is perfect. And because we’re not perfect, we don’t measure up to the standard that God requires. And so, while we were God’s enemies, He sent His Son to live the life that we ought to have lived and died the death that we ought to have died, all so that He **would get you**. Do you feel the wonder that captivated Paul? That God Almighty cared about little ole me, with all my issues, with all of my mess, and still did whatever it took to save me from my sin.

And we’ll end with the great missionary Hudson Taylor. In 1853, he arrived in China to do missionary work. As an English gentleman, he found that he, a foreigner, brought a foreign message in a foreign way. And so Taylor willingly surrendered his rights to comfort, ease, and reputation for the sake of the Gospel. He began to eat, dress, and act like a common Chinese person, to the ridicule of both the British and Chinese, but the Gospel advanced as the Chinese began to see the Gospel is less of a foreign light. Taylor was fierce about doing whatever it took

³ Carson, 128

for the sake of the Gospel. He said once, “China is not to be won for Christ by quiet, ease-loving men and women. The stamp of men and women we need is such as will put Jesus, China, and Souls first and foremost in everything and at every time – even life itself must be secondary.” Over the next 47 years, Taylor would have a massive impact for the Gospel. Much of the Chinese church today can trace its roots back to Hudson Taylor and China Inland Mission. Everything was second to the Gospel. We read biographies of great men like Hudson Taylor because it reminds us that Hudson Taylor is not all that different from you and me. He’s not Paul, who had a unique conversion and call to the Gospel ministry. He’s a regular person, saved by the same Gospel that we are saved by. And so we all can ask the question, “What are my rights compared to the Gospel?”.

Let us pray.