Freedom, Rights and a Higher Prize
1 Cor 9:1-27

We're looking at 1 Corinthians and the passage read to us earlier from chapter 9. Before we do, cast your mind back to last week. Paul is dealing with a group of Christians in Corinth who we could call those 'in the know', because they know that pagan idols aren't really real; and they're strong in their faith and they know idols don't have any genuine power.

The problem is, they were living out that knowledge in ways that harmed others. They knew that eating meat offered to idols couldn't harm them, so they felt totally free to go to their guild dinners, and eat with colleagues and clients at the idol temples. But other Christians, maybe new Christians recently converted from paganism, didn't see things like that. To them idols, and the power of these pagan religions were only too real. So for them, eating in a temple, or seeing a fellow Christian eating at a temple, was a major problem. It could lead them back into sin, or at the very least wound their conscience. And so back in chapter 8, Paul says to 'those in the know', those so-called strong Christians,'Take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak' (8:9).

Now, you might think, 'idol temples, and eating in idol temples? This has got nothing to do with me, move along.' Except it touches on two issues that are major issues in our own day. In fact, they're so engrained in our culture that you probably just take them for granted: and they are your personal freedom and your individual rights. And that you'll only be happy and truly thrive in life if you're free to live as you want and your right to do so is respected.

But what we're going to see is that Paul says Christianity is very different. But not so as to diminish your happiness, but to maximise it. And not just your happiness, but those around you. Plus, it gives you a far higher purpose to live for than just yourself.

Insisting on Your Rights
Look at v1: 'Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?'

It's like a machine gun fire of rhetorical questions isn't it? And that's probably because Paul is deliberately mimicking the way the so-called strong Christians in Corinth were talking to the weak: We know idols are nothing, don't we? We're Christians aren't we? We don't believe in all this superstitious stuff, do we? So I have a right to do this, don't I?

But by adopting their tone, and proving he's a genuine apostle, Paul's not trying to pull rank or have them respect him. He's making the case that as a genuine apostle he too has certain freedoms, certain rights.

Verse 4, 'Do we not have the right to eat and drink?' Verse 5, 'Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles?' Verse 6, 'Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?' So, if those in the know, those strong believers thought they were free to behave in certain ways, that they had a right to do that, well, as an apostle, so do I , Paul says. I have the right to receive financial support from you.

And he uses three examples from everyday life to drive that right home: v7, 'Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?' In other words, people get paid for the work they do.

And then he piles on the pressure just a bit more - that the Old Testament law says exactly the same: v9-10 'For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake?' So if the Bible says animals should be fed for the work they do, shouldn't those who preach the gospel? 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?'

But then, in v13-14 he ups the pressure even more - that the priests in the temple get their food from the sacrifices in the temple, and then, just in case they were thinking, yes but that's all Old Testament stuff, v14, 'In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.' That when Jesus sending out the 12 and then the 72 he said, don't take any money, eat and drink what people give you, 'for the labourer deserves his wages.' (Luke 10:7).

So Paul says, everyday life, and the Old Testament, and Jesus himself all tell you that those who preach the gospel have a right to financial support. And I'm an apostle, I preach the gospel, and I have that right.

Now, imagine a world where everyone insisted on their rights, and fighting their corner, and 'I've got a right to this, and you've got to give it to me, or I'm free to do this, and you can't stop me.' Imagine the impact of that kind of attitude on relationships, or places of work, or whole societies. Sadly, it doesn't take much imagining, does it? Every day we see just such fault lines in marriages and families and societies.

And James writes, 'What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and you do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel' (James 4:1-2). In other words, at the root of conflict are our desires, our wanting this or that for ourselves, and I'm not getting it, so I'll fight you for it.

But think also how much you dislike it when you think someone is imposing on you, or infringing your personal freedom, maybe even just someone asking you to do something that you don't want to do.

You see, Paul's point is not, I have the right to financial support and you're not giving it to me. It's, 'I have these rights as an apostle, just like some of you are claiming certain rights and freedoms, but I willingly choose to forego them. Because it's in giving up freedom to live however you want that you will find a wonderful, transformative power.

Giving Up Your Rights

Look at v12, '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.' Back in chapter 8 he called them out for putting 'a stumbling block' (8:9) in the way of the weak, and now he's saying, 'well, Barnabas and I do everything we can *not* to do that - even if it means we go without. And we want you to have the same kind of attitude. That rather than living to please yourself, you live a life of sacrifice for others.'

Verse 15, ‘But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision.’ So, he’s not saying this to guilt trip them into giving to him. ‘I’m not after your money’ he’ saying. Verse 15 again, ‘I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting.’ And that is, v18, ‘That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge.’

You see, Paul knows that him being an apostle, him preaching the gospel, isn’t really a matter of choice for him; rather, v16, ‘necessity is laid upon me.’ I mean, Paul would say, ‘I was persecuting the church, I was angry and violent and full of hate, and then Jesus broke in. And I deserved his anger but he showed me his love. I deserved his judgement but he showed me his grace. I deserved no pity and yet he forgave me, and commissioned me to be what I am now. And because he has so freely loved me, it’s my joy to freely share that love with others. So, Paul’s a man whose life has been so transformed by Jesus’ generosity to him, that he wants to show that same generous attitude to others.

Now, you can go through life being self-protective, can’t you. You can guard your personal freedom, and keep people at arms length, and make sure they don’t demand too much of you. But that’s not what Jesus did, was it? Jesus could have been self-protective. He could have guarded his rights as the Son of God. Rights to worship and glory and honour. Rights to power and authority. Yet he gave them all up. And at the cross, his rights were trampled on. Why? For me, Paul would say, for you. Out of his love, he sacrificed all for us. And Paul is saying, in the face of such love and generosity, how can I be self-protective and self-focused or demand my rights?

Now, if we resent it when someone infringes on our time, or freedom, or if we get angry when someone isn’t giving us what we think we deserve, and we can see the fractures in relationships when people insist on their rights, what might happen if, like Paul, we took a different path?

The Way of Service, The Way of Blessing

Look at v19, ‘For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all.’ Literally, I’ve made myself a slave to all. So, our current culture says, insist on your freedoms, and some of these Christians in Corinth were doing exactly that. But Paul says, ‘there is a different path.’ Rather than pursue your own interests, voluntarily give up what should be yours, take your freedom and use it to freely serve others.

And when he says that, whose example is he following? In his gospel, John tells us that on the night Jesus was betrayed, ‘Knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God’ - knowing that all the rights and the freedom of heaven were his, Jesus ‘rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel… began to wash the disciples feet.’ (John 13:3-5). The King of Heaven, the One with the right that everyone in heaven and earth kneel before him in worship, laid aside those rights with his clothing, and knelt before these men and did the job of a house slave.

You see, whichever path you take, you’re going to be a slave to something. Insist on preserving your rights, and you’ll be a slave to your freedom. Always want to come out on top and you’ll be a slave to others’ opinion of you, or of manipulating them. But follow Jesus, the freest man who ever lived, give yourself in service to others out of love, and you’ll find true freedom. As Paul writes in Galatians 5: ‘For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.’ (5:13).

Now that was as counter-cultural back in Paul's days as now. So why do it? For two reasons. Number one, for the sake of others: v19 again, 'I have made myself a servant to all, *that I might win more of them*.' Paul will do anything and everything, including giving up his rights, to care for, and win others for the gospel. Verses 20-22: '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… that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law… 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.' So the very people these strong Christians at Corinth were dismissing, the weak, Paul was willing to enter their world, to come down to their level, to win them. But not just them, but for any and every outsider who needed Christ.

Now, someone observing Paul's lifestyle might say, 'you are so inconsistent, you're such a chameleon, changing how you live just to fit in, you've zero principles.' Except he has one principle that overrides every other, to serve Jesus and do whatever he can to win people to Jesus. To flex his life, to lay aside his preferences, to give up his freedoms, to see others come into true freedom, to experience the fullness of Christ's saving, restoring, transforming grace like he's experienced it.

What might living like that look like for these strong, in-the-know Christians in Corinth? It'll look much less like asserting their rights and freedom, won't it, and much more like humility and love and sacrificial care for weak and new Christians.

But what might it look like for you? It might mean going to home group or Bible study when you'd rather not, but you go because you know your brothers and sisters will be encouraged just by you being there. It might mean not buying that new gadget, or piece of clothing, which you're perfectly within your rights to buy, and instead giving that money to some gospel purpose. It might mean serving in youth or Sunday school, and investing in the lives of the young, when you'd far rather have a lie in on a Sunday morning. It might mean foregoing that promotion so you have more time to volunteer in your community project. It might mean investing your pay rise in some specific missions project rather than increasing your standard of living. Whatever it looks like for you, Paul is saying, the way of Christ is the way of life-laying down service, of investing your life in the salvation and the growth and the flourishing of others.

And yet, Paul doesn't just do it for others. Verse 23, 'I do it all for the sake of the gospel, *that I may share with them in its blessing*.' Living a life of service doesn't just bless others, it blesses you.

Back in December, one of my daughters told me about an article on the BBC. It was titled, 'Why being kind to others is good for your health.' And it documents how serving others through volunteer work, or giving your money generously, or random acts of kindness, don't just make you feel psychologically better, they leave you physically better. In fact it says, quote, 'volunteering correlates with a 24% lower risk of early death – about the same as eating six or more servings of fruits and vegetables each day…' - which means, live like Paul says here and you don't have to eat spinach and Brussel sprouts. It goes on, 'Volunteers have a lower risk of high blood glucose, and a lower risk of the inflammation levels connected to heart disease. They also spend 38% fewer nights in hospitals than people who shy from involvement in charities.'

So, want to stay healthy, stay out of hospital? Serve others! But Paul got there first, didn't he. Paul had discovered the joy, the gospel blessings of service over a self-centred life. And he wants them and us to discover it too. And he'd discovered it because Jesus got there before him. As Paul said to the Ephesian elders, 'In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way *we must help*

the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ (Acts 20:35).

It can be great to receive a gift, can’t it? But can’t it also be a huge blessing to give one? That joy, that little inner kick you get from giving to others and seeing their faces light up. And Paul is saying, ‘extend that to all of life. Make your life a life of giving up, of serving, not demanding. And you will be blessed.'

But it can be hard can’t it? Because the thing about sacrificing is… it’s a sacrifice.

It takes self control and the long view to do it
Verse 24, ‘Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.’

Now, if Lausanne is the home of the Olympic Games, the IOC, Corinth was the home of the Isthmian Games - held every other year. So these Corinthians would have known all about athletes. It was like having the Olympics in your home town every two years.

And Paul is saying, think what an athlete is willing to give up, and go without for the sake of standing on that podium. Think of the sacrifices, the nice food, the lie-ins, the late nights, the pleasing themselves they’re willing to give up; think of the self-restraint and self discipline they’re willing to expend, and for what? For a prize that doesn’t last. For a fame that’s fleeting, for a crown of laurel wreathes that shrivels up. And for some, the glory doesn’t even last a few hours, does it? Within hours of kicking the drop goal that won England the Rugby World Cup, Johnny Wilkinson describes falling into a pit of despair. Or for those of you old enough to have watched Chariots of Fire, think of Harold Abrahams, who won his race in the Paris Olympics, achieved the prize all his years of training had been aimed at, and then darkness enveloped him, because he realised how fleeting it all was.

And Paul says, they’re willing to go without, they’re willing to sacrifice so much for that, so shouldn’t we for the prize that’s infinitely more valuable; that lasts forever? The prize of eternal salvation and growth in faith for others, and for the words of Jesus to us, ‘well done good and faithful servant’.

So, Paul says, v26-27, ‘I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control’ - literally, I make it my slave - ‘lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.’

To cultivate the attitude and life-long practices that your life is going to be one of service can be hard. There are going to be days when you just want your own way. And Paul says, don’t give up. Don’t waste your energy on stuff that saps your spiritual life. Exercise self-control. Make your body serve the purpose of you serving others. Live with eternal purpose. And keep your eyes on the far better prize.

And those you serve will blessed, and you’ll be blessed, and throughout all eternity you and they will be glad you did.