

The Imperfect Church – 16
The Selfless Church
1 Corinthians 9:1-23

Introduction

In a 2012 Commencement address at Wellesly High School in Massachusetts, David McCullough Jr. (son of David McCullough Sr., the famous historian and author), dispensed with the traditional “Spread your wings and be whatever you want to be” kind of speech and instead shocked his audience of high school seniors with an unpredictable theme: “You're not special.” He went on to say, “You've been pampered, cosseted, doted upon, helmeted, bubble-wrapped. Yes, capable adults with other things to do have held you, kissed you, fed you, wiped your mouth ... trained you, taught you, tutored you, coached you, listened to you, counseled you, encouraged you, consoled you and encouraged you again You've been feted and fawned over and called sweetie pie But do not get the idea you're anything special. Because you're not.” McCullough pointed the students to what he called “the great and curious truth of human experience”—namely, “that selflessness is the best thing you can do for yourself. The sweetest joys of life, then, come only with the recognition that you're not special.”

This attitude, of acknowledging that you are not special and do not get to break the rules because you're so awesome, is at the heart of what Paul now teaches to the Corinthian Christians. And this is a message they desperately need to hear. Repeatedly throughout the letter, Paul has attempted to bring a sense of humility to them. They believe they are wise and intelligent, spiritually elite. In fact, they believe, they are so elite that they don't have to follow the same rules as everyone else. They are in such special category of Christian that they can do things that others cannot do. They are strong, everyone else is weak. They are smart, everyone else is dumb. They are mature, everyone else is a baby by comparison. Over and over again, Paul has been injecting them with healthy doses of Gospel humility.

1:2 – ²I am writing to God's church in Corinth, to you who have been called by God to be his own holy people. He made you holy by means of Christ Jesus, just as he did for all people everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.

Whose church is this? It's God's Church. Who called you? God did. Who has made you his own holy people? God has. How did you become God's holy people? By the work of Jesus. Not your own. Not your initiative. Not your wisdom. Not your cleverness. Not your intelligence. God has done all of this.

1:18-29 – ¹⁸ The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God. ¹⁹ As the Scriptures say,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise
and discard the intelligence of the intelligent.”

²⁰ So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world’s brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish. ²¹ Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe. ²² It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom.²³ So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it’s all nonsense.

²⁴ But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God’s weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength.

²⁶ Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. ²⁷ Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. ²⁸ God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. ²⁹ As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

3:1-3 – Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn’t talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in Christ. ² I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren’t ready for anything stronger. And you still aren’t ready, ³ for you are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn’t that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren’t you living like people of the world?

You can clearly see what Paul has been trying to get them to understand. You are not special! And if there is anything special about you, it is because God has made it so. This sense of superiority has come up again in this issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols. We introduced the issue last week in chapter 8. In ancient pagan cultures like Corinth, idolatry reigned supreme and was literally everywhere in their culture. You couldn’t attend a social gathering, go to work, or even eat without it being tied to some pagan god or goddess. Due to how the sacrificial system worked in the pagan temples, you could not eat meat at home or purchase it in the market, without it having been dedicated to the honor of an idol.

So how are Christians supposed to deal with this issue, since they are to separate from culture (as God's called-out ones) and flee from anything to do with idolatry? That was the question and disagreement among Christians in Corinth. Most understood the truth that idols aren't real anyway, so eating meat sacrificed to them wasn't a theological problem. There is only one God and he is the only one we are concerned with. However, there were those who had what Paul called a "weaker conscience" that was a bit more sensitive and easily led astray. Their moral compass was not as strong, so participating in pagan idol feasts was beyond the pale for them. They simply could not comprehend how Christians could think that was ok. Even though the strong had correct theology on their side, Paul never sided with the strong and called on the weak to get with the program. He called on the strong to show deference to the weak, to love them, to care more about them than pursuing their own personal freedom.

While the strong were concerned with their own freedom (word for authority), Paul was concerned for his brothers and sisters in Christ. They had the knowledge, but their love was lacking.

8:9-13 – ⁹ But you must be careful so that your freedom does not cause others with a weaker conscience to stumble. ¹⁰ For if others see you—with your "superior knowledge"—eating in the temple of an idol, won't they be encouraged to violate their conscience by eating food that has been offered to an idol? ¹¹ So because of your superior knowledge, a weak believer for whom Christ died will be destroyed. ¹² And when you sin against other believers by encouraging them to do something they believe is wrong, you are sinning against Christ. ¹³ So if what I eat causes another believer to sin, I will never eat meat again as long as I live—for I don't want to cause another believer to stumble.

So this issue they have brought up that they are so concerned with their freedom (authority), Paul isn't really concerned about that. Rights and freedoms never come first. Here is how he put it to the churches in Galatia:

Galatians 5:13-14 – ¹³ For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. ¹⁴ For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

And now as he continues his argument to them about how to handle this "gray" area of eating meat sacrificed to idols, he turns now from his initial teaching to them to his own personal example.

Scholar William Barclay sums up Paul's motivation here in chapter 9 like this: "The whole point lies in this—the Corinthians who considered themselves mature Christians have been claiming that they are in such a privileged position that they are free to eat meat offered to idols if they like. Their Christian freedom gives them—as they think—a special position in which they could do things which might not be permissible to lesser men and women. Paul's way of answering that argument is to set out the many privileges which he himself had a perfect right to claim, but which he did not claim in case they should turn out to be stumbling-blocks to others and hindrances to the effectiveness of the gospel."¹

As we get into our text for today, hear what Paul says about himself, all in the context of personal freedoms/rights, and setting them aside for the benefit of others.

1 Corinthians 9:1-23 - Am I not as free as anyone else? Am I not an apostle? Haven't I seen Jesus our Lord with my own eyes? Isn't it because of my work that you belong to the Lord? ² Even if others think I am not an apostle, I certainly am to you. You yourselves are proof that I am the Lord's apostle.

³ This is my answer to those who question my authority. ⁴ Don't we have the right to live in your homes and share your meals? ⁵ Don't we have the right to bring a believing wife with us as the other apostles and the Lord's brothers do, and as Peter does? ⁶ Or is it only Barnabas and I who have to work to support ourselves?

⁷ What soldier has to pay his own expenses? What farmer plants a vineyard and doesn't have the right to eat some of its fruit? What shepherd cares for a flock of sheep and isn't allowed to drink some of the milk? ⁸ Am I expressing merely a human opinion, or does the law say the same thing? ⁹ For the law of Moses says, "You must not muzzle an ox to keep it from eating as it treads out the grain." Was God thinking only about oxen when he said this? ¹⁰ Wasn't he actually speaking to us? Yes, it was written for us, so that the one who plows and the one who threshes the grain might both expect a share of the harvest.

¹¹ Since we have planted spiritual seed among you, aren't we entitled to a harvest of physical food and drink? ¹² If you support others who preach to you, shouldn't we have an even greater right to be supported? But we have never used this right. We would rather put up with anything than be an obstacle to the Good News about Christ.

¹³ Don't you realize that those who work in the temple get their meals from the offerings brought to the temple? And those who serve at the altar get a

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 91–92.

share of the sacrificial offerings. ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord ordered that those who preach the Good News should be supported by those who benefit from it. ¹⁵ Yet I have never used any of these rights. And I am not writing this to suggest that I want to start now. In fact, I would rather die than lose my right to boast about preaching without charge. ¹⁶ Yet preaching the Good News is not something I can boast about. I am compelled by God to do it. How terrible for me if I didn't preach the Good News!

¹⁷ If I were doing this on my own initiative, I would deserve payment. But I have no choice, for God has given me this sacred trust. ¹⁸ What then is my pay? It is the opportunity to preach the Good News without charging anyone. That's why I never demand my rights when I preach the Good News.

¹⁹ Even though I am a free man with no master, I have become a slave to all people to bring many to Christ. ²⁰ When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I was with those who follow the Jewish law, I too lived under that law. Even though I am not subject to the law, I did this so I could bring to Christ those who are under the law. ²¹ When I am with the Gentiles who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from that law so I can bring them to Christ. But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ.

²² When I am with those who are weak, I share their weakness, for I want to bring the weak to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. ²³ I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings.

This text divides into two simple sections. V. 1-14 focus on Paul's rights as an apostle. V. 15-23 focus on Paul's example for them to follow.

1. PAUL'S RIGHTS (V. 1-14)

He begins his argument with a series of rhetorical questions to set the tone. Am I not free? He has just declared in 8:13 that he will never eat meat again if that means he would not cause another believer to stumble. But what about his freedom? What about his authority to do what he wants to do? And am I not an apostle? If there is anyone who has authority, it's an apostle. The Apostles were called by God to be the "sent ones" into the world to take the Gospel to new places. They had divine authority, were used by God in miraculous ways, and when they wrote letters, they were inspired by the Holy Spirit and we have them in our New Testament. I mean, if there is anyone who could claim their rights, it is Paul. He's seen the Lord with his own eyes (v. 1). That matters. The resurrected Jesus chose him out of all the others. Notice his last question there in v. 1...it is because of Paul's work that the Corinthian Church even exists. If anyone is going to lay claim to personal rights and authorities, it is Paul, not them.

Remember, this is the Church that has as one of its slogans, "I am allowed to do anything" (6:12). They are very concerned about being able to do what they want. And he throws their claim to rights right back in their faces. Paul uses the same word (*exousia*/authority/right/freedom) 3x in v. 4-6. He goes on to list several of the freedoms/rights that the Apostles have utilized over the years. The right to be provided with room and board. The right to bring a wife to travel along, and for her to be supported too. The right to financial support. It is this one that Paul focuses on for a bit.

While other apostles traveled around and received financial support from whatever people they were currently ministering to, Paul chose to go a different route. Paul utilized a skill and was a tent maker. So instead of taking money from the Corinthians, he worked in a trade to cover his expenses, so that he would never take any funds from them. Though Paul was willing to accept money from churches he had previously worked with (most notoriously the Philippians), he never did from the current church he was working with. And the Corinthians do not like that at all. The issue blows up in 2 Corinthians, but has apparently already started bubbling enough that he brings it up here. For some unstated reason, Paul believes that if he accepts money from them, it will be an obstacle to the Gospel.

Couple reasons this could be the case: 1) the Sophists (traveling wise men) charged exorbitant rates, and Paul wants to continue to distinguish himself as different from them (started that in chapter two); 2) Paul doesn't want anyone to think he is insincere in his motives, so he will work to pay his own bills; 3) could it be that the Corinthians wanted to pay him so that there was some sense of ownership of Paul? Paul holds all the cards in the relationship...he came to them, preached the Gospel, planted the Church. For people who are prideful like they are, they don't like being only on the receiving end, they want some skin in this game. But Paul won't let them, lest they attempt to control aspects of his ministry. Though it is rare, this does happen in church world. Few are brashly ignorant enough to say it out loud, but from time to time, someone says, "I want...I think...You should...after all, I pay your salary." No, you don't. That works about as well as you telling an officer who has pulled you over that your taxes pay their salary. Not a good thing. Paul is trying to keep that from becoming an issue here.

Paul will use multiple illustrations to prove the point that, though he doesn't accept support from them, he absolutely has the right to it.

v. 7 – soldiers don't have to provide their own rations

v. 7 – farmers eat from among their own harvest

v. 7 – shepherds drink milk from their own flock

- v. 8-10 – the OT law dictates that ministers are to be paid
- v. 13 – temple workers eat from the offerings at the temple
- v. 13 – those who serve at the altar eat from the sacrifices
- v. 14 – (saving the best for last) Jesus commanded it

Notice what Paul has done...he has set up the scenario that he is undeniably due many things from them. He absolutely has the right, the authority, to get these things from them. If you want to argue over rights, Paul is going to win. He has articulated a rock-solid argument that they do not have a chance of winning. But here now he turns that argument, and not only wins it, but obliterates their demand to personal rights and freedoms.

2. PAUL'S EXAMPLE (V. 15-23)

v. 15 - ¹⁵ Yet I have never used any of these rights. And I am not writing this to suggest that I want to start now. In fact, I would rather die than lose my right to boast about preaching without charge.

Though Paul has all these rights, he has not asserted any of them. He willingly, voluntarily, lovingly sets those rights aside for the sake of ensuring Gospel work continues in the lives of the people around him. Notice how he does that:

v. 19-21 - ¹⁹ Even though I am a free man with no master, I have become a slave to all people to bring many to Christ. ²⁰ When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I was with those who follow the Jewish law, I too lived under that law. Even though I am not subject to the law, I did this so I could bring to Christ those who are under the law. ²¹ When I am with the Gentiles who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from that law so I can bring them to Christ. But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ.

This is one of the more well-known passages from 1 Corinthians. But it is typically pulled out of context and used to promote things Paul never intended. He is making this point: "Though I can do whatever I want, I purposely restrict those freedoms, which enable me to move in and out of different cultural backgrounds, so that I can share the Gospel with them." Now, this is not some wishy-washy, vanilla sort of theological hypocrisy that allows him to fit in with anyone, like a chameleon. He never altered the message of the Gospel, that was sometimes offensive and considered foolish. But he did purposely limit himself (not the message) to enable him to gain a hearing from different groups of people.

Anyone who has done cross-cultural missions understands the rationale behind this. In any given culture, there are things you could do that would undermine your opportunity to gain a hearing. In many middle-eastern and Eastern cultures, their respect for the holy book of their religion is so pervasive, if they see you disrespect your Bible (like place another book on top of it), you've lost them. When you are immersed into a different culture, you end up (in a good way) adopting some of their customs. Indians have a head-waggle that is their way of agreeing and saying "yes." In the Philippines you never call someone over by beckoning them with your fingers raised up. You always do it with your fingers down (fingers up is how you summon a prostitute). This is what Paul is saying. He goes into these different groups and adapts appropriately for the sake of the Gospel.

v. 22 - ²² When I am with those who are weak, I share their weakness, for I want to bring the weak to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some.

His argument circles now back around to the issue at hand...instead of condemning the weak for being weak, how about sharing in their weakness so that the Gospel can continue its work in their life.

v. 23 - ²³ I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings.

Spreading the Gospel matters more than you exercising your personal freedoms and rights. When he says "share in its blessings" that phrase literally translates, "become its partner." So here is how this goes: if you choose to assert your rights, you can become an obstacle/stumbling block to Gospel work in the world. But if you choose to forego demanding doing whatever you want, you become a partner with the Gospel in its work in the world.

Here is the ultimate reason to give up your rights and to share in the weaknesses of those around you for the sake of the Gospel...that is exactly what Jesus did for us.

Romans 8:3-4 - ³ The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. ⁴ He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 5:21 – ²¹ For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.

2 Corinthians 8:9 – ⁹ You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.

Galatians 3:13 - ¹³ But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." ¹⁴ Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith.

Philippians 2:6-8 - ⁶ Though he was God,
he did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to.
⁷ Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.
When he appeared in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross.

M.D. Hooker – "Christ became what we are, he was made what we are, he was sent into our condition, *in order that* we might become what he is. Paul, in turn, became what the men and women to whom he was proclaiming the Gospel were, in order that he might gain them for the Gospel."²

All Paul was doing was following in the footsteps of Jesus. May we all do the same. Jesus became man for you. Jesus became the likeness of sin for you. Jesus became the curse of condemnation for you. Jesus came in the poverty of fragile human life for you. All to bring the Good News of his death, burial, and resurrection to you.

BELIEVE/REPENT/CONFESS/BAPTIZE
COMMUNION

² Hooker, 1996, 91-92, as quoted in David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 436.