

The Ox

1 Corinthians 9:1-18

Paul just told the strong in Corinth to use their liberty to love the weak, to use their rights not for selfish ends but to serve God. He is under the same obligation, and giving up his rights is something that he receives as a reward.

Work

Four rhetorical questions establish the calling, liberty, qualification and success of Paul's labor (v1). He is an apostle, is free to act as one, has seen Jesus, and preached the gospel effectively to the Corinthians. He didn't minister to everyone, but certainly did to the Corinthians who served as the seal of his apostleship (v2). Planting that church and ministering to them was hard and messy work, but everyone with biblical eyes could see what had happened for God's glory. God inspired Moses to command that an ox not be muzzled while he treads out the grain entirely for the sake of His people (vv9-10). Clergy have been called the third sex, while they ought to bring to mind plodding, productive animals. A minister doesn't simply play a role like advice-giver or spiritual guru. He ought to have a seal upon his ministry and the kind of knowledge and work ethic that accomplishes something, namely, disciples of Jesus Christ who are fed, led and protected. We've seen Paul doing all these things in this letter while also teaching that it's God who gives the increase (3:7). He preaches the gospel (1:23-25), delivers wisdom on every issue, and tells them how to discipline unrepentant Christians (5:9-13). The pastor is like a soldier, a vineyard planter, and a shepherd whose work can be verified. This is Paul's defense (v3). The comparisons illustrate the fact that a pastor does a job like anyone else in the sense that it's work.

Provision

Should he be able to eat and drink after a full day's work? Is it okay to bring along a gospel-loving wife in the work like the other apostles, Jesus' brothers, and Cephas did (vv4-5)? Paul is being attacked and disrespected for not getting paid for his good work and defending his actions is part of gospel ministry. If he is unqualified, incompetent, or unworthy of a wage, then what does that say about his message? There's a world of difference between being defensive and faithfully defending what matters. A person who goes to war, plants a vineyard, or herds a flock hopes to reap from what they sow (v7). Paul is simply channeling the law: "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain" (vv8-9; Deut. 25:4). The ox would trample corn loose from the husks, and then the mixture would be tossed into the air as wind blew away the chaff and the heavier grain fell down together. You don't want a productive ox to be starved and thereby discouraged, but to plow in hope (vv9-10). It should not be a stretch to connect faithful and fruitful spiritual work to material compensation (v11). Other ministers were paid by the Corinthians, so how much more ought Paul to be (v12)? This is how it worked in the Temple, and Jesus affirmed the same thing about preaching the gospel this when He told the disciples "the workman is worthy of his wages" (Lk 10:7; Matt. 10:11; v14). The elders are responsible not to muzzle the ox, nor

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to ensnare the ministry by overpaying him. And ministers must be willing to make financial sacrifices for the gospel and health of the church.

Motivation

Paul hasn't exercised his right to be paid and isn't making this case so that he will be. On the contrary, he'd rather die than to make his boast vain (v15). He was compelled by Jesus to preach the gospel and it would be his shame to disobey (v16; cf. Acts 9:6). He will be rewarded for doing the work willingly, but the task is on his shoulders regardless (v17). Paul knows one day he will receive a crown of righteousness, but the reward right now is to preach the gospel free of charge and to be without the accusation that he is abusing his authority (v18). In the economy of Christ, what would feel like a heavy burden and cost, Paul's receives as his *reward*. We ask him why he preaches and serves for free, and his answer is so that he can preach and serve for free. Knowing and serving the Lord wholeheartedly is its own reward. It's not the only reward, but one of the most wonderful. Who can touch it? This is why a genius like Paul will happily makes tents in Corinth so that he can preach the gospel freely (Acts 18:3-4). This strength only comes by knowing the Lord and His joy (Neh. 8:10). Paul is not motivated by money or status or reputation or comfort or his own glory or peace, but by God's gospel and glory alone.