

INTRODUCTION

I've never preached through first Corinthians before. So I've never preached a sermon on this topic. *Reader's Digest* magazine had an article by a former pastor and the title of the article was: *Why I Quit the Ministry*. And this man went on to talk about some heartaches that he had had in serving at a church. He had been to college and seminary and had a master's degree. He gave several reasons for why he quit the ministry. But one of the reasons was that the little church where he was serving did not pay enough money for him to support his family. And he came to a place in his life when he looked at the education, training and the experience that he had, and he went into some other business just so he could make enough money to pay the bills for his family. Now that's not the case in every church, but it is the case in some churches. I heard about one pastor at a little church, and they didn't pay much money. He went to the bank on Friday to cash his paycheck, and the teller gave him some money that just happened to be dirty, soiled currency. And she said, "Pastor, I'm so sorry to have to give you this dirty money. You better be careful. It may have germs on it." He said, "Don't worry. Even a germ couldn't live on my salary."

Every year in the Southern Baptist Convention, 2,200 pastors and staff members either leave the ministry voluntarily or are terminated involuntarily. They are out of the ministry. And one of the reasons sometimes is because lack of financial support. You may have heard about the church that was praying for a new pastor. An old man was praying about this, and he said, "Lord, all we want is a poor, humble preacher. And Lord, if you'll keep him humble, we'll keep him poor."

Now that's one extreme. But the other extreme of course, is something that we've seen in the last few years—the ostentatious lifestyle of some of these so-called evangelists who preach a prosperity gospel. And they believe that that they should live in opulence and extravagance and luxury. You remember Jim Bakker and the PTL scandal...and you remember his air-conditioned doghouse. He had milked thousands of Christians for their money so he could live in that kind of a lifestyle. And so what you have is one extreme where churches don't support their ministers financially. On the other hand, you have some who take advantage of that kind of lifestyle and live in luxury. But somewhere right in between is the standard that God has given. Now I want to say that this is a church that financially supports its ministers. And for that I'm eternally grateful. There is not a complaint in what I have to say. In fact, when you look at the average for churches our size, we are

right where we need to be. But I preach this message because it's in the text and also because some of you have influence in other churches. They may need to hear this message about what God's word says about supporting your ministers.

First Corinthians 9:1-14 says:

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? ² Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. ³ This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. ⁴ Don't we have the right to food and drink? ⁵ Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas^[a]? ⁶ Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?

⁷ Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink the milk? ⁸ Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? ⁹ For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain."^[b] Is it about oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? ¹² If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. ¹³ Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.

I. THE INDICATION OF A PROBLEM (9:1-6)

In this section, Paul is going to ask 17 questions. He really has more questions than he has statements. The church members in Corinth have written him asking him about a number of things. And he says, "I want to ask you some questions...." and he throws all these questions out. This is an indication of a problem at the church at Corinth. Now you're not surprised, are you? This church was full of problems. That's why Paul wrote this letter. There were factions in the church. A group of people in the church questioned Paul on two levels.

1. Paul's authority

They judged Paul's authority, according to verse 3. They were saying, "Peter is an apostle. John is an apostle. James is an apostle, but Paul is not an apostle." And they were challenging whether or not he was a true apostle. There were several

qualifications for an apostle. And one of the things they had to do to demonstrate or claim the authority of being an apostle back was having seen the Lord Jesus Christ. He reminds them of seeing Jesus on the road to Damascus, according to Acts 9.

But another justification to prove the authority of an apostle was if they could perform miracles. Peter performed miracles, and Paul did perform miracles. So Paul said, “Listen, guys, I'm an apostle. The church in Jerusalem may not say that I'm an apostle, but I am an apostle to the Gentiles.” Verse 2 says the church in Corinth is the seal of his apostleship in the Lord. He says the very fact that there's a church in Corinth is proof of the fact that I'm an apostle.

2. Paul's rights

The second thing they questioned was Paul's right to receive food, drink, etc. from the congregation where he preached—in other words, his basic needs...not luxury, not opulence...but basic needs. And he says, not only should you meet my basic needs, but I have a right to also have the needs of my family met. We believe Paul was not married at this time. But since he was an apostle, many think you had to be married to be an apostle. So we don't know for sure, but we do know he's not married at this time. Peter was also married, and he took his wife with him to preach. Somebody has said the reason Peter denied Jesus three times was because he healed his mother-in-law. Well, I don't know about that, but Peter took his wife with him!

I believe every preacher of the gospel who serves the Lord full time can expect the church to meet his basic needs and also the needs of his family. I'm so grateful that you provided an income for me and my family, so that my wife doesn't have to work. But some people in Corinth did not think Paul had a right to the same support that the other apostles did because they did not consider him an apostle.

II. ILLUSTRATIONS FROM PAUL'S LIFE (9:7-8)

Here Paul draws from several illustrations from life to say that you ought to support your minister.

1. A soldier

When a soldier enlisted in the Roman army, the army basically met his needs and said, “You don't have to go out and buy your food. You're in the army. Now we're going to provide your food. You don't have to go out and buy your own clothes. We're going to give you a uniform to wear. You don't have to go out and buy your own weapon. We're going to give you a weapon. We're even going to pay you a salary to be in the army.” That's the way the Army works today. That's why some people go into the armed services because you can make a little bit of money, and most of your needs are met. A soldier doesn't have to pay his own way through the army, Paul says, so why should a minister have to do that?

2. A farmer

Does a vintner have to go down to the local grocery store and buy his own grapes? No, if he plants the vineyard and he tends the vines, he can eat the grapes. If he's hungry, he doesn't have to go somewhere and buy food. That's just natural.

3. A shepherd

Shepherds at that time kept sheep and goats. So, Paul said, if a shepherd gets thirsty, he doesn't have to go somewhere and buy his own milk. He can milk his own goat and drink that milk; it's available to him naturally. So Paul asks, "Why are you giving me such a hard time about this?" Apparently a lot of people there said, "Paul, we don't have any responsibility to support you. He said to look at these three illustrations.

III. ILLUMINATION FROM THE SCRIPTURES (9:9-12)

Paul says, "Let's look at the word of God and the law of Moses about not muzzling an ox while it is treading out grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? This was written, Paul says, for us preachers! The text is Deuteronomy 25:4 where God describes how when an ox is treading the grain and busy working, do not put a muzzle on him. Farmers would put freshly harvested wheat on the floor to divide the husks and kernels of wheat. They would let an ox walk all over it, stomping all the grain. He would be separating the chaff from the wheat, and then they would take these winnowing forks or fans and throw it up in the air. The wind would blow the light husk or chaff away, and the kernel of the wheat would fall down. You put an ox there with all that good grain and what's he going to do? He's going to bend down and he's going to start eating some. Some farmers put a muzzle on the ox so he had to work without eating. So what does God's law preventing that teach us about God?

God loves animals, by the way, since he made that law for an animal. But Paul points out that he was talking about us. You're breaking God's law if you refuse to support someone who is ministering and working among you. That is the same thing as muzzling an ox and God's against that. There are some pastors today who are no longer in the ministry because they were Reverend Muzzled Ox. And there were churches that muzzled that pastor when it came to his support, and that pastor had to spin an inordinate amount of his time trying to figure out how he could pay his bills. I think that's why some of these pastors get into Amway and some of these other organizations. A church ought to support their pastor so that he never has to do anything else to support his family. That's God's standard. Paul says, do not muzzle that ox.

1. Paul's right to receive support

Paul says in verse 11 that he planted spiritual seeds, so it's only natural to expect a material harvest. He's talking about financial support by a "material harvest." He says, "I have a right to that. And you ought to be doing that."

2. Paul's right to refuse support

In verse 12, Paul is saying, "You folks ought to be supporting me financially. I want you to know I have that right, but I have not claimed that right. I have not taken one thing from you so that the gospel of Jesus Christ would not be hindered in any way." Paul was an unusual guy. Even though he had a right to support, he claimed his prerogative to refuse that right. Paul was what we call a tent-making preacher. In Acts chapter 20 when he's saying goodbye to the elders from Ephesus, he says he paid for his living for three years working and making tents so he could support himself. I worked among you and how with my own hands I paid for my living.

You folks support me and my family financially, wonderfully just like you do the other staff members in this church. But I want to tell you, and God knows my heart, if you didn't pay me a penny, I'd still be here preaching. I feel like God's called me here. And I think he's going to meet my needs. In fact, if, if you didn't pay me to do this ministry, I would pay you to let me do it. I've told people before I love tomatoes so much. You could probably just pay me off in tomatoes. That's what Paul was saying. He says, "I love what I'm doing so much that even though I have a right to it, I'm not going to claim that right."

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING GOD'S SERVANTS (9:13-14)

Did you know how the priests got their food? People would bring food sacrifices, and they would get a portion of that to eat. Paul makes it very clear that the Lord has commanded them to support him. He says, "Forget about what I say, but the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel." When did Jesus say that now? Commentaries say it could have been in Luke chapter 10, verse seven, where Jesus said the laborer is worthy of his hire. Or it could have been that time when Jesus sent out 70 disciples in 35 teams of two and told them not to worry about what they were going to eat. He said, "Don't worry about the food that you'd have or the clothing; it's going to be provided for you." Others believe Jesus made that statement and it's just not recorded in the Bible. Jesus did many, many more miracles than we read about in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Right? In fact, John concludes his gospel by saying all the books in the world couldn't contain all the miracles Jesus performed. And I don't know about you, but one of the things I'm looking forward to when I get to heaven is saying, "Lord, tell us about some of the other miracles you did that I didn't read about."

Have you ever thought about it? The same could be true of the teachings of Jesus, the sayings of Jesus. There are some of them that we don't have recorded. But yet

there were early Christians who heard them, and they are the commands of the Lord. The Lord knew that somebody else would quote him in the Bible. For instance, in the book of acts, it says, "...the Lord said it is more blessed to give than receive." We don't have that from the first-person in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. It's quoted instead. So there could have been a very specific statement that Jesus made where he commanded that those who preached the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.

I thank God for every bi-vocational pastor, someone who serves in a church that is so small that he has to provide his own income or at least a portion of his income because the church can only pay him part-time. However, God's standard and God's plan for every church is that those who preach the gospel receive their full-time support from the gospel. I believe that's God's ideal.

You remember that little slogan, "Support your local police"? Or "Support your local sheriff"? Let me give you some tips on how you can support your local pastors.

1. Offerings

And that's exactly what Paul was talking about here. He's talking about financial support. When you give your offering every Sunday to the budget of this church, you're paying for the salary and the support of all the people who work for this church. And you know, it's not just the ministerial staff. We have 60 or 70 people, and even more than that at special times of the year, who receive some kind of financial support in terms of a salary through this church. And when you give your offerings to the church, you're supporting your ministry financially by supporting the budget of the church. I've known some people who like to designate their offerings because they don't want to "give my money to pay that preacher" or "to pay that staff member." The terrible thing about that attitude is that when you really get down to it, the staff salaries are usually always going to be paid. You're just hurting the overall ministry of the church when you always want to designate your offering, rather than giving it to the general budget of the church. And so support your staff with your offerings.

2. Prayers

Every time someone comes to me and just simply says, "I am praying for you," it means so much to me. I can't tell you. It is really more valuable to me than the paycheck that I get. I love to do what I'm doing. And I thank God that he's called me to be here. But when somebody says they're praying for me, that's like a bonus in my life.

3. Service

There's always something that needs to be done in the church. There's always a place for volunteers to teach in Sunday school, to lead out in the different

ministries. And one of the best ways you can support a pastor and staff is when somebody asks for volunteers, you offer to help. Every church has some wonderful people willing to step forward and say, "Whatever you need me to do, I'm here to help." You're being such a support when you give your local staff and your pastor your encouragement. I wish that the church could be more like that "home on the range" that we sing about where "seldom is heard a discouraging word." Don't you? But there are people out there complaining against the church. They do damage and hurt the pastor and staff by their negative, discouraging statements. I have found that it takes about 10 encouraging letters to cancel out one discouraging letter. And it takes about 10 encouraging statements to cancel out one discouraging statement.

I'm going to make a statement that you may not believe is true, but I promise you this is true. I almost hesitate to say it because I'm afraid it'll stop. But I've been pastor here for over four years, and not one week has gone by in the over four years that I've been pastor that I have not received some note of encouragement from somebody. And it's not the same person. It would be wonderful if there was one person who every week was sending me an encouraging note. But that's not it; it comes from different members of this church. I've kept track. I first noticed it when I was here for about two and a half years, and that record hadn't been broken yet. And I just want to tell you that is so valuable and I appreciate it. And the other staff members appreciate it so much when you just drop a little note of encouragement to say, "I'm praying for you." Paul says if you want to be God's kind of church, you ought to provide support for those who are preaching and serving the congregation.

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