

# Limitless Freedom?

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our reading this morning is from 1 Corinthians chapter 9, which is on page 1150 of your church Bible. 1 Corinthians chapter 9.

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? 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. This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me.

Don't we have the right to food and drink? 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? Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living? 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? Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn't the law say the same thing? For it is written in the law of Moses, do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain. Is it about oxen that God is concerned? 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 shedding in the harvest.

If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?

[ 1 : 44 ] But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than handle the gospel of Christ. 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? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.

But I have not used any of these rights, and I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast. For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel.

If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward. If not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust that I am not committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this, that in preaching the gospel, I may offer it free of charge and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law, I became like one under the law, though I myself am not under the law, so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law, I became like one not having the law, though I am not free from God's law, but I'm under Christ's law, so as to win those not having the law. To the weak, I became weak to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like someone running aimlessly. I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave, so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. This is the word of the Lord.

Good morning, St Silas. My name is Martin Ayres. If you've not met, I'm the lead pastor here.

Thanks, Ruth, so much for reading. We're going to be looking together at that passage, so if you could keep it open on your phone or if you have a church Bible in front of you, it's page 1150, 1 Corinthians chapter 9, and you can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful to see where we're going. So let's pray and ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray.

[ 4 : 59 ] Heavenly Father, we praise you and thank you for the gift of your word, and we pray that you will open your word to our hearts this morning and open our hearts to your word, for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

I fight and you may die. Run and you'll live at least a while, and dying in your beds many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that for one chance, just one chance, to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom.

Those are the famous words said in the movie Braveheart by William Wallace. I'm sorry that I don't have the accent to get your blood pumping as you heard that. But it's a movie that says that freedom is a cause worth dying for. You would give your life to get your freedom. And that's a very hot topic today.

Lots of the causes that people fight for today are about rights for themselves or for others, and about freedoms to secure them. But once we have our freedom, what will we use our freedom for? What if there was a cause that came to be so important to us that we would willingly choose to lay down our freedom for that cause? What if it was a cause of such supreme value that it meant so much in our hearts that we would even be able to rejoice as we restricted our own freedom and lay down our rights for the advance of that cause? That's what we approach here in chapter 9 of 1 Corinthians. The Christian faith offers us freedom. Jesus said, if you hold to my teaching, then you really are my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

[ 7 : 00 ] We could think of lots of different ways that Jesus sets us free. He sets us free from fear of death. He sets us free from needing to please God by our own merit, which we could never achieve.

But the particular freedom we're thinking about this morning is that God gives us lots of freedom in the Christian life to make our own decisions in life. He gives us a moral framework. He reveals his will in the scriptures to us, and sometimes there are clear commands for us to obey about what to do and what not to do. But when there are big decisions in our lives, where should I live? What should I do with my time? Who should I spend time with? We have considerable freedom. And day by day in our lives, as we make little decisions every day, God gives us considerable freedom. But chapters 8 and 9 of 1 Corinthians can reshape how we make those decisions that we're free for. How do we use our freedom?

Last week, we heard that the Corinthians have written to Paul about their rights. And the specific question they had was, were they free to eat meat that they bought from the marketplace, but had previously been offered in sacrifices at the pagan temples in Corinth? And we heard last week that as far as truth goes, they were free. They were free to eat the meat. At the same time, Paul was aware that other Christians in the church were troubled by people eating that meat and using that freedom because they didn't think they were free. So they were being discouraged and thinking that for those people who were eating the meat, that obedience to God didn't matter. And Paul says, love is more important than your freedom. Love is more important than your knowledge. So knowledge brings freedom, but love should limit your freedom. The love for your brother or sister in Christ who might be discouraged by you exercising your freedom. Paul would rather never eat meat again than have another Christian stumble over him eating meat. Now what Paul does next in this chapter is he turns to himself as an example that embodies this mindset of using your freedom for the good of others. And it's extremely challenging.

But as we read it, we're not to think this was just Paul the Apostle. Because as we get forward, by the time we get to chapter 11 verse 1, Paul says in this whole section, follow my example as I follow the example of Christ. So this isn't Paul the super Christian or Paul the Apostle. This is Paul the model that he expects and calls every Christian to follow. So what is this mindset that governs Paul? With our first point, Paul has rights, but he serves those who hear the gospel. He has rights, but he serves those who hear the gospel. So he's writing to a church that thought about its hearers and speakers in quite worldly ways.

And in Corinth, you thought more of a speaker the more you had to pay for them. So Harry and Meghan, they would have gone down really well in Corinth. They'd have thought if they're getting paid that much, they've got something to say. Maybe they'd think the same about Boris Johnson and Tony Blair.

[ 10 : 33 ] They're big after dinner speakers that you pay a fortune for at your charity event. So they look down on Paul because Paul never charged them. Even after they become Christians, he didn't

ask for money. Evidently because of their confused attitude towards respectable speaker means give them more money. And Paul needs to show them that that was why he was doing that.

That the way he lived among them, not asking for their money, wasn't because he was deficient to the well-paid speakers. It was because of this mindset that governs how he exercises his rights. And he demonstrates that for us with this long series of questions that show that he has rights. So look again at verse 1. Am I not free? Yes, you are, Paul. Am I not an apostle? Yes, he is.

He met Jesus, the risen Jesus, on the road to Damascus and had this searing vision of the risen Jesus as Jesus commissioned him to take the gospel to the nations. He goes on, Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? And yes, they are. He brought the gospel to Corinth.

They became Christians through his message. So he can add verse 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.

[12:00] So then he turns to his rights as an apostle and he proves to them that he has the right to be paid for proclaiming the gospel. So he says that's what God's word says. If you look down at verse 9, He says, That's the big idea. So Paul has the right to be paid. He is free to be paid.

But then we get the shock that Paul's not writing this whole thing so that they start paying him. Look at verse 15. He goes on, But I have not used any of these rights.

And I'm not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. For I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast.

Paul's whole Christian life is tied up with this commission from Jesus to preach the gospel. And it drives his whole life.

So he says, War to me if I do not preach the gospel. He has to do it. And so he doesn't ask for money for it. And folks, it's worth pausing to think about that, isn't it?

[13:57] That that was no small thing for Paul. In an empire where it was dangerous to travel. In cities where there was no free prescriptions, no free medical care.

There was no welfare state. And Paul is in a job that seems to cost you everything. And he's not taking the salary that God's word says he's entitled to take.

But he tells us why in verse 12. He says, On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.

That's the key idea. That he came into a situation where to ask for money would have hindered the progress of the gospel. Maybe it was because people would have looked at Paul in this established church in Corinth, receiving money, and maybe they would have stumbled over that and thought, Is the gospel really true?

Or is this just Paul's way of getting money for himself? Well, either way, whatever it was, for Paul, the priority that governs his life is the progress of the gospel.

[15:10] In chapter 1, he told us that the gospel is centered on, it's the message about the cross of Jesus, that that is God's wisdom and God's power to save anyone who puts their faith in that message.

Because when you trust in Jesus' death on the cross, he becomes for you your righteousness, your right standing before God. And when we get to chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians, he defines the gospel. He says the gospel is the good news about what Jesus did, that he died for sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he appeared according to the scriptures, because he was raised from the dead.

So he died for sins and he rose again to smash death to bits. And that is the news that governs the apostle Paul's life. His priority is making that news known so that people follow Jesus and are saved forever.

And he's calling every Christian to have that mindset, that if you meet Paul, what you think of Jesus matters so much to him, he will lay down his rights if they would get in the way of you trusting that message.

[16:18] He makes sure in Corinth that the gospel is free at the point of entry. And he's flexible on that in other churches he established.

So the Old Testament verse he applies there in verse 9, do not muzzle the ox. He applies in 1 Timothy chapter 5 to Timothy, who's in Ephesus, commanding the church to pay its ministers, its elders.

He writes to the church in Philippi, thanking them for sending mission support for him so that he can go to other places with the gospel and it will be free for its hearers there.

And he writes to the church in Rome and tells them in chapter 15 that he wants them, when he visits them, to support him as he seeks to take the gospel west from Rome to Spain. But where exercising that right to be paid might get in the way of people responding well to the gospel, he lets go of it. And Paul's approach to money here is worth thinking about for us as a church.

[ 17 : 22 ] This is what we're doing with our mission partners as a church as we give money to support mission partners. One of them is Robin Silsen. Robin and Annabelle, who many of us know, went to Winchborough this year.

And last year, actually, they've gone to live in Winchborough. And he is sent there by St. Columbus Free Church in Edinburgh. But we're supporting him and them as a family financially. And the aim with our support and St. Columbus support is that Robin will be free to share the gospel in Winchborough with that launch team and lead that team in mission without people, as soon as they become Christians, having this burden fall on them to pay for Robin.

And we want that message to resound that the gospel is free at the point of entry. We don't want Robin under pressure with new Christians. But as new disciples are made in Winchborough and the church we're praying for gets established there, we'd hope that they would follow 1 Timothy 5 and support Robin.

And hopefully they'll then send other people in Scotland and around the world. They'll support pioneering mission. Paul's approach to money in Corinth also reminds us, doesn't it, that sometimes money can be a stumbling block to people following Jesus and responding well to the message about Jesus.

And I think we have a problem with this in Scotland today because the way that the church has operated in the past means that when people hear us invite them to church, they often think it's because we need their money.

[ 19 : 06 ] You know, they think that we must have, you know, a project on the go to restore the roof or to protect bats in the belfry or something. And we're running the quiz night because we need to do a bit of a whip round and help pay for the roof.

That's what people think when we invite them to church. And so we need to work hard to compensate for that and reassure people that exploring the Christian faith really is free.

More than that, we want them to know that responding to Jesus is responding to God's free gift to them, God's generosity to us at the cross. It's a message that you can be saved by grace alone. So Paul's model mindset for every Christian is the gospel is a cause so special it takes hold of you and you're willing to lay down your rights, even the rights clear in God's word for the sake of your witness to the world.

So that's our first point. Paul has rights, but he serves those who hear the gospel. And then we discover not just what Paul won't do, but more positively, what he will do.

[ 20 : 18 ] Our second point, Paul has freedom, but he lives like those who need the gospel. So have a look down with me at verse 19. He tells us of his freedom, verse 19, though I am free, and then what he does with his freedom, though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone.

And his motive, to win as many as possible. And picture the cost of what he says next. To the Jews, I became like a Jew to win the Jews.

And speaking of what that meant, because he's talking about the law of Moses, to those under the law, I became like one under the law, though I myself am not under the law, so as to win those under the law.

It sounds so simple, but for any of us who've lived in a different culture to our own, we will know what a costly thing that is to say. I mean, I lived in Beijing, I was seconded there when I was working as a lawyer, but really, I lived with expats in Beijing.

Actually, to immerse yourself in a different culture is extraordinarily costly. And for Paul, he's become a Christian from a Jewish background, so he's found himself free from a legalistic mindset that dominated Judaism at that time.

[ 21 : 47 ] He sees that he's liberated from hundreds of laws that he would have kept since he was a boy. He's persecuted by the Jewish people for his message about Jesus.

And he deliberately goes back and submits himself to those many, many rules again. And not because those are his people now, they're not his people anymore.

But because those religious moralists, he wants to reach them for Jesus. And he knows they feel bound by those rules. And if he doesn't keep them, they might not listen to him so well. So he will enslave himself to live like them. He wants to win them for Christ that much. It's extraordinary. This is like going to live somewhere overseas and discovering when you get there that false religion has trapped people into all kinds of customs and superstitions about what they'll eat and what they won't eat, about when they'll work and when they rest, about festivals they keep and rituals they follow, about what they wear. And you know, walking into that culture, that you are free in Christ from all of it. But you choose to submit yourself entirely to that culture in the hope that it will open a door for the gospel, for the message about Jesus.

[ 23 : 12 ] The only limit on you in that decision is where their cultural behaviors would mean that you were disobeying Jesus because the whole thing is about obeying Jesus.

So verse 21, he talks about the Gentiles, the non-Jews, to those not having the law, I became like one not having the law, though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law, so as to win those not having the law.

So Paul is still living to please God, he's under the law of Christ to love the Lord with all his heart and to love his neighbor. But when he's in a Gentile culture, a non-Jewish culture, he throws off any tradition that might unnecessarily mark him out as different in the hope that by becoming like people, he can win them for Christ.

And thinking about chapter 8, he called the people who had an overly tender conscience when it came to rules about what you eat, he called them weak.

And so he picks up that language again in verse 22. To the weak, I became weak to win the weak. And then the breathtaking summary, I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means, I might save some.

[ 24 : 33 ] So folks, this is Paul's revolutionary choice about how he uses his freedom. It was followed by Hudson Taylor who went to China in the 19th century and founded what today is OMF, Overseas Missionary Fellowship.

He spent 51 years in China, repeatedly going back, Hudson Taylor. And he was known, different to the other people who were going from Scotland and the rest of the UK at that time with the news about Jesus around the world, he was known for his sensitivity to Chinese culture.

So Hudson Taylor wore the native Chinese clothing with satin shoes and a silk gown and he had his head shaved except for a single shock of hair at the back that was grown long and plaited.

And his principle was right from this chapter so he wrote this. He said, let us in everything not sinful become like the Chinese that by all means we may save some.

So William Wallace in Braveheart says freedom is a cause you would die for. The Apostle Paul says Jesus Christ gives you freedom. You're free as a Christian but when the gospel takes hold of you when you grasp its implications for everyone around you you find it's a cause that means you would freely give up your freedom where that would help others be one for Christ.

[ 26 : 02 ] And when I think about what it looks like to be a committed Christian today what does it look like to be a committed disciple of Jesus today lots of the time it's not so much to do with what God tells us we must do it's more about what we become willing to do because we freely choose to do it because a new priority has taken hold of your heart as a Christian.

If you think about our youth leaders who give up their Friday nights to spend time with high school people our volunteers and parents who drive in midweek to run mainly music for toddlers and their carers think about the teams who cook for the life course and host and lead on the life course you think about the people who stand for vestry so that they can be at work behind the scenes serving to enable that kind of ministry to be going on nobody could say that any of those people have to do those things if you ask anybody to do any of those things they could say I don't have to do that and they'd be right they are free not to do those things we have freedom but love calls on us to choose willingly to limit our freedom in the Christian life freedom with our time with our money with our gifts and talents our resources if you think about someone in a career in medicine or engineering being asked by their church leadership if they'd consider being set apart from their secular job to be a full time gospel worker if you ask any individual like that who has people discern they've got the character and the competency and the temperament where that might be an appropriate thing for them to do any of those people could say

I don't have to do that and they will be right they are free not to do that and it might be a very costly thing they might be giving up a career in a way that would be costly in all kinds of ways they don't have to do it so what moves people to do it in their best moments is it not Paul's mindset that they would look at the world around them and think though I'm free it's worth me becoming a servant of all in order that I might save some it's the mindset that runs right through this letter it's so good that we've got chapter 9 some of you are thinking shouldn't we be doing something Christmassy and we're not quite there yet in our morning services because doing this chapter makes sense of so much else that Paul says in this letter when he commended singleness as a way of life in chapter 7 even though marriage is a good gift he said singleness is better because the time is short and this world is passing away his life his choices are governed by this gospel urgency that everyone we meet is either on the wide highway that's leading to everlasting destruction or the narrow way that's leading to everlasting life and the dividing line is what do you make of Jesus and the gospel news about him and so Paul will lay down his freedom in order that some might be won for Christ I've got a friend Roseanne who trains missionaries in Japan and she was saying on a recent prayer update how the number of people willing to go to Japan has gone down in recent years people going from places like the UK and maybe that could be said of going to the Middle East or going to Spain with the gospel or going to Romania with the gospel but whenever any of us think should I go we could easily think I don't have to go I'm free not to go but what's caused Christians to go to places like that in the past if you think about John Paton he grew up in Ayrshire in the 19th century and he left his home his family had never left the area in Ayrshire they were from he left his home to go to Glasgow which was so far away to work for the Glasgow City Mission in a deprived area people had given up on and then having established a great community of believers there he left it he left it and got on a ship and he sailed to the New Hebrides where a whole island was converted to Christ under his ministry with immense personal cost to him and to his family what moved him to do that what moved the Scottish

Olympic gold medal winner Eric Liddell to get on a train at Edinburgh Station and move to China with the fans who'd watched him win Olympic gold singing a hymn for him on the platform as the train pulled away they were all free in Christ not to go but the cause of the gospel had taken hold of their hearts and it compelled them to choose to lay down their freedom I've become all things to all people in order that by any means possible I might save some and strangely it's probably easier to see what that looks like when it's a big decision about moving overseas or changing your job but let me ask would you be willing to make your decisions in Glasgow with that same priority of the gospel maybe it would still affect where you live or what you do with your time on our weekend away in May we heard from Andy Robertson who lives with his family on a housing scheme in Dundee and people have moved there with him our vestry met up with

[ 31 : 45 ] Pete Stewart not so long ago who heads up another church on a housing scheme in Barlanoc in northeast Glasgow and both are places where a team has been willing to move to that part of the city because they've seen that in so many parts of Scotland and the UK the gospel the evangelical churches are in middle class areas and they've thought what will it take to bring the gospel to more deprived areas economically deprived and it's involved for them being willing to move to a place in the city they wouldn't have chosen and when they're there dressing differently doing different hobbies so that they can live like the people they want to see one for Christ that by all means possible they might save some and where we're not moving could that mindset shape how we use our freedom in the many little decisions we make every day as we think about how we might spend a free evening that we've got in the diary how we might invest in other people who we might spend time with what we say yes to what we say no to it could be as simple as just being deliberate about taking an interest in another person in a neighbour in a colleague just being deliberate about being a bit more interested in what they're interested in so they know you're interested in them being interested in what they're passionate about because we know it matters to them so it matters to us all things to all people that by all possible means

I might save some so that's our second point we've heard about Paul giving up his rights we've heard about him laying down his freedom at the end of the chapter he says he partly does that for his own sake so that's our third point Paul has a ministry but he strives for the eternal reward of the gospel so you see him the turn happens at the end of verse 23 did you notice that he says I do all this for the sake of the gospel and we might expect him to say that others might share in its blessings but he says that I may share in its blessings and then he goes on verse 24 do you not

know that in a race all the runners run but only one gets the prize run in such a way as to get the prize Paul pictures the Christian life like being a disciplined athlete and the point is not that only one person gets to glory like winning a race the point is that in the

Christian life it takes discipline to keep running now because the prize is yet to come the prize is in the future and I take it that the illustration here of the devotion and the diligence and the discipline of the elite sportsman is being used by Paul of the everyday Christian life of chapter nine of mission of witness of laying down our rights and our freedoms that others might hear of Christ that's what he's modelling for us and just by the city of Corinth where this church is where Paul had lived was one of the locations for the Olympic Games at that time Paul might even have made tents for it as he was a tent maker a bit like the tents in Qatar at the moment for people watching the World Cup to stay in whether or not he'd been there himself he asks the Corinthians to remember what those athletes look like who compete at the

Olympic Games and we know what they look like today don't we we can say look at Katie Archibald Duncan Scott Laura Muir think of their determination that is the picture of the normal Christian life living a life of mission does your Christian life look like that does it look like languishing at the back of the school cross-country run or straining forward to win the Olympic gold medal look at verse 25 everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training they do it to get a crown that will not last but we do it to get a crown that will last forever just imagine if they'd interviewed Chris Hoy after he won Olympic golds and said so the hard work paid off Chris didn't it and he said do you know what not really I didn't really train very much I didn't really do much I just kind of coasted along on my bike and I won gold they never say that do they they never ever say that they give up their freedom for years because their eyes are fixed on the medal and Paul says that's the normal Christian life give up your freedoms now that people around you would come to know Jesus because your eyes are fixed on future glory and pressing on towards it will help you get there and in verse 25 he contrasts the Olympic winner's wreath with one that lasts forever and the wreaths in the first century they were made of withered celery can you believe it withered celery he's saying if they could do all that work for a wreath of withered celery surely we can give up our freedoms now for the sake of gospel witness that it might help us be disciplined straining forward for an eternal crown and we know that crown is coming because chapter 15 Jesus really did rise from the dead showing us we really can trust him for his promise that every one of us who keeps running that race will be given a resurrection body and life with him forever let's pray together just a moment of quiet to reflect on how God has been speaking to us in his word gracious God and loving heavenly father we praise you for the gospel that it is news about

[ 38 : 20 ] Jesus powerful enough to save everyone who believes and even to save us father may your spirit teach us more and more to love the things you love to live as though the present world is passing away that we would use the great freedom you have given us in Christ not for ourselves but for the good of others that they might be saved we ask in Jesus name amen