

The Measure of a Minister (1 Corinthians 9:1-18)

There's a game we play in life that is detrimental to our personal spiritual health and the spiritual health of the church. The game I'm speaking of is the comparison game. What is the comparison game? It's when we measure ourselves, (i.e. performance, talents, body image, etc.) by comparing ourselves to others in order to determine how successful we are and derive our sense of significance. Paul admonished the Corinthians who commended themselves by playing the comparison game when he wrote: *"But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding"* (2 Corinthians 10:12).

We are all familiar with this tendency because we all have engaged in the practice of comparison at one level or another. And not only have we all subjected ourselves to the comparison trap, but we also measure the worth and value of others by playing the comparison game. This human tendency has been intensified by the increasing use of social media.

Do you know that many Pastors and ministry leaders often experience what has been coined the *Monday blues*? In an article about this phenomenon, Joshua Finley suggests 3 causes for Monday blues; a decrease in adrenaline, spiritual attacks of the enemy, and the comparison trap. He suggests that many Pastors fall into the trap of evaluating themselves on Monday by comparing themselves with the best Instagram video or highlight reel of some of the top communicators in America. And of course, by doing so they feel like they can never measure up. But Pastors are not the only ones measuring themselves in this way. Often those who they are striving to serve also measure them in the same way.

In a recent message on unity in the church, Daniel Henderson shared that he once interviewed Leif Anderson, The President of the National Association of Evangelicals. In that interview, he asked him, "What makes ministry more challenging today than say 200 years ago? Leif Anderson's answer surprised him. He said, "What makes it more

difficult is that 200 years ago the only way to compare your pastor with another pastor was to go on vacation.” Daniel Henderson elaborated, “Today every pastor in America is compared against the best of the best and those are edited versions. Because of comparison, every Pastor is a dud before they even open their mouths on Sunday morning. I always say, ‘comparison is an ugly game because nobody ever wins it.’”

Now to be a healthy Christian and a healthy church we do need to measure ourselves and we should learn from the godly example of others. However, the ultimate measure of our spiritual maturity is Christ. When we keep our eyes on Jesus there’s no room for boasting. When the measure of our spiritual lives is Christ we are all humbled before Him.

Main idea: The measure of a true minister is seen in how they serve to build others up in Christ, especially people who cannot give them anything in return.

To unfold this theme, we are going to consider three observations about a true and faithful minister of God that we all should honor and or strive for.

1. The Rights of a Minister of Christ

The first observation about a true and faithful minister that we will consider is the **rights** of a minister. In the second half of his letter to the Corinthians, Paul has been answering questions from the Corinthians about things like singleness and marriage and the exercising of rights and liberties in Christ.

In chapter nine it appears that Paul is addressing questions that had to do with him personally. We’ve learned from the first part of Paul’s letter that there were factions in the church that aligned themselves with other prominent church leaders. Although these factions were divided by their association with their preferred leaders, the leaders themselves would not have condoned their cliquishness.

Rather these leaders, which included Peter and Apollos, viewed themselves as being on the same team. Nonetheless because the church was playing the comparison game, the great Apostle Paul himself fell victim to it. Factions in the church were questioning Paul's authority as a leader and minister of the gospel. And beginning in chapter nine Paul addresses his critics and gave his defense. He writes:

“Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? ² If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 9:1-2).

Remember in chapter 8 some in the church because of their knowledge felt they had the right to exercise their Christian liberties, even though by doing so they were causing others to stumble. But Paul on the other hand, although He had freedom and the authority of an Apostle, was careful how he exercised his rights. Nevertheless, some in the church still questioned Paul's Apostleship, which is why he's posing the questions that he does in verse one.

“Am I not free,” Paul asked. As we will see later in the chapter, it appears that the more progressive believers in the church were questioning the way Paul chose to limit the use of his freedoms for the sake of others. Next, he asks, *“Am I not an apostle?”* Because of how Paul limited the use of his rights and freedoms, namely in receiving financial support, it appears that some in the church, perhaps the legalist, were also questioning His apostolic authority. Therefore, Paul also asked, *“Have I not seen the Lord. Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?”* The fact that the Christ physically appeared to Paul and called Him to plant churches, which Paul established in various places including Corinth, was proof of his apostleship (v.2).

Now while answering his detractors, Paul also reminds them of the **rights** of a minister of God, namely to receive financial support. Paul continues: *“This is my defense to those who would examine me. ⁴ Do we not have the right to eat and drink? ⁵ Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers*

of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶ Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?" (1 Corinthians 9:3-6).

Why is Paul making a defense for the rights of ministers of the gospel to receive financial support? We know from verse 15 that Paul was not making his case because he wanted to secure financial provision for himself. On the contrary, Paul refrained from exercising this right. And it appears that this decision by Paul not to exercise his rights is why some in the church were taking issue with him. Why would they take issue with Paul for this?

Remember, in the previous chapter Paul admonished the progressive wing in the church whose knowledge gave them the liberty to eat meat offered to idols. But although their knowledge enabled them to disassociate what they ate from the worship of idols, others in the church, because of their pagan backgrounds, were unable to do the same. Therefore, the exercise of the liberties of the "so called" knowledgeable believers became a stumbling block to the weak. And because they exercised their liberties without regard for others, Paul said, they sinned against their brothers for whom Christ died (1 Corinthians 8:11).

They sinned because the **love of Christ** not their **liberties in Christ** should have been the controlling factor in their decisions, especially when they could have a negative impact on others. What's is the controlling factor for the decisions you make in your life; your liberties in Christ or the love of Christ? When we are not controlled by love we are enslaved by our entitlements.

Why did the Corinthians insist on exercising their liberties without regard for how it impacted others? Because they felt entitled and believed it was their right to do so. They turned their liberties in Christ into a license to fulfill their own desire, their own agendas, and selfish ambitions. Their focus was on getting all that they had coming to them, which fit right in with the culture of Corinth.

Now because some in the church were more focused on their entitlements in Christ, rather than on Christ Himself, they had a

problem with Paul and his others-oriented way of life. Their sense of entitlement led them to question Paul's apostleship because he refrained from exercising his rights and receiving what he was entitled to, unlike their preferred and favorite leaders.

Paul didn't fit their view of the kind of leader they wanted to be associated with. And because of their entitlement-oriented mindset, Paul could not **measure up** to their expectations. Did you get that? Paul, who saw Jesus and was called by Him to be an Apostle, Paul, who at his own expense came to Corinth to preach the gospel and planted the church of Corinth, could not measure up to their expectations. Their entitlement mindset gave them a twisted perspective of Paul and caused them to become discontent with Paul's ministry to the church.

But Paul didn't allow people who were impossible to please to cause him to run from his calling and neither should we.

Concerning why the Apostle Paul was being judgmentally examined, and why we sometimes do the same thing, one commentator writes: "Everyone knows how to put other people on trial. When someone doesn't fit into our special life narrative, we examine them, we scrutinize them with surgical precision. We pore over every word of the emails they send. We read into every line. Every text message is like a bomb threat. Every personal encounter is a tense, awkward, forced-smiles affair. Why do we relate to this person through a filter? It is because we have put them on trial for not fitting into our story.

Why were they putting Paul on trial? In short, they felt that they were entitled to a particular kind of leader and that they were entitled to control the situation in order to get the kind of leader they wanted. What they wanted was a strong, articulate, impressing, showy, culturally acceptable leader. They wanted to identify with someone who was respected, well known—someone who could go toe-to-toe with the philosophers in town, someone with the charisma and rhetorical [skills] of the popular speakers who had recently passed through. Paul did not have any of this, and their message to the

apostle was essentially, shape up or ship out—start fitting into our special like narrative, Paul or it's over.” Stephen Um

How many of you know the greater hindrance to unity and harmony in the church is not the absence of freedom, but an overarching sense of entitlement.

Now remember that Paul doesn't disagree with the entitled in the church about the rights of a minister. He doesn't disagree that a minister of the gospel is entitled to be financially supported. In fact, Paul makes a case for the rights of a minister to help correct their faulty thinking. He makes the case by appealing to common sense and the authority of scripture.

Paul writes: *“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?”* (1 Corinthians 9:7). What Paul is implying here is that like a soldier, a shepherd and a sower benefits from their labors, even so a minister, who devotes his life to ministry, should also be compensated. But Paul doesn't only make a common-sense argument, he appealed to the authority of scripture: *“Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? ⁹ 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? ¹⁰ Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? ¹² If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?”* (1 Corinthians 9:8-12).

From Deuteronomy 25:4 Paul shows that the bible teaches that both animals and farmers, who labor in the fields, do so with hopeful expectation that they will share in the fruit of their labors. And he emphasizes that the bible is not only making this point for the sake of animals and farmers, but for the sake of those who sow spiritual things into the lives of others. In other words, those who sow spiritual things should be able to count on reaping physical benefits.

Now keep in mind that the reason that Paul is making a case for the rights of ministers is not because he is looking for a raise. It's not because he wants to secure provision for himself. Paul's aim is to teach the entitled Corinthians about the measure of a true minister of God.

This brings us to a second observation about a true and faithful minister of God.

2. The Resolve of a Minister of Christ

With the rights of a minister of God in view, notice secondly **the resolve of a minister of Christ**. What is the holy resolve of a Spirit filled minister of God? Before we answer that question, keep in mind that whether you are earning a salary in full time vocational ministry or not, every believer is called to ministry. All who are saved are called and gifted to build up the body of Christ and to make disciples in the world (Eph. 4:11-16).

With this in mind, what is the resolve of a Spirit filled minister of Christ? After making the case for the rights of a minister to receive financial support, Paul continues:

“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” (1 Corinthians 9:12).

Paul was resolved to give up his rights and entitlements if need be so that his proclamation of the gospel would not be hindered. In other words, Paul did not want the message of Christ to be contradicted because someone questioned his motives for ministry.

Paul was not in the ministry to make money or to make a name for himself. He was in the ministry to make much of Jesus. Paul was in the ministry to build others up in Christ regardless of whether people could do anything for him in return. Paul's joy was to see others growing in faith and increasing in love to the glory of Christ.

Now if Paul had received financial support he would have done so in order to be freed up from having to make a living so that he could devote more time to the ministry. In fact there were times when Paul did receive support from churches (Philippians 4:16). But in Corinth, although Paul's motives would have been right, he understood that the entitlement culture of Corinth was prone to project their bent to serve for selfish gain upon him. So Paul's reason for not receiving financial support wasn't because ministers who do are less spiritual. In fact, Paul exhorted the church to give double honor, which included financial support, to faithful church leaders, especially those who labored in the word (1 Timothy 5:17-18).

And again in verses 13 and 14 of our text Paul reaffirms the right of those who proclaim the gospel to be supported based on both the teachings in the Old Testament concerning those employed in the service of the temple and the teachings of Jesus, namely that "the laborer deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7).

But now after making his case for the rights of ministers, Paul reiterates his resolve to give up his rights so that he might fulfill the call of God upon his life. Paul continues:

"But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting" (1 Corinthians 9:15).

Most commentators agree that Paul's words, *"For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting"* are difficult to fully understand. What is the boasting that Paul is referring to that he would rather die than to go without it? Paul is not talking about boasting in himself, or in his accomplishments or even in his sacrifices. We know from 2 Corinthians 12:9 that Paul boasted in how his weakness and hardships demonstrated the sufficiency of Christ.

Paul refrained from taking money from the Corinthians not so that he could appear more spiritual, but because it would have been a

stumbling block to the unspiritual in the church of Corinth. Remember, according to Acts 18:1-11, Paul helped to plant the church in Corinth. But the entitlement culture of Corinth, which was still influencing this young church, would have hindered Paul's preaching if he would have sought their support.

Because Corinth was overrun by con-artists, soothsayers and philosophical and religious teachers who were in it for the money, if Paul would have solicited support, some would have associated him with the charlatans of his day. Others would have felt they had a claim to Paul and could control him with money. Either way the message of the gospel and goal of his ministry would have been hindered. And Paul would rather die before allowing even what may have been his right to hinder the message of the gospel.

But Paul did not begrudge the giving up of his rights, he boasted in doing so. And his boasting was not one of self-exaltation but of boasting in the sufficiency and necessity of the gospel. Paul continues: *"For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship"* (1 Corinthians 9:16-17).

Paul didn't preach the gospel for fame or earthly gain. Rather his treasure was the gospel. Paul was entrusted with a precious stewardship, namely to preach the gospel and being faithful to fulfill his stewardship was his motivation (v.17). He didn't preach the gospel in order to make a living or to please his fans. He had to preach the gospel because of the urgency and necessity for the gospel to be proclaimed so that the lost could hear, believe and be saved (v.16). Paul felt such a necessity to preach the gospel that he pronounced a curse over himself if he failed to fulfill the call of God upon his life (v.16). To Paul preaching the gospel was not optional (v.17). It was his calling from God. In fact, it was more than his calling; his resolve to do so free of charge was his reward.

This brings us to a third observation about a true and faithful minister of God.

3. The Reward of a Minister of Christ

We looked at the **rights** and **resolve** of a minister of God. Notice now the **reward** of a minister of God. Having explained the necessity in him to preach the gospel in order to fulfill the precious stewardship of God entrusted to him, Paul concludes:

“What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:18).

What enabled Paul to lay aside his rights and entitlements to minister the gospel and to serve others even when they had nothing to offer him, even when those he blessed criticized him? Paul explains that his reward was preaching *free of charge* and not making full use of his right in the gospel.

To put it another way, Paul’s reward was ministering the gospel to others at his expense, especially people who did not, could not or would not give him anything in return. And that brothers and sisters is a picture of the gospel of Jesus Christ itself.

Paul could serve others free of charge because Christ, who was entitled to the universe, gave up his rights and came into our world not to be served, but to serve and sacrifice himself to save sinners. Paul could offer his ministry free of charge and at his own expense because he had already received the ultimate treasure, namely a saving relationship with Christ free of charge in whom we find forgiveness, acceptance, significance, all that we need.

“It’s this free-of-charge gospel, as one commentator noted, “that sets us free from the grip of entitlement. We are free to give up the director’s chair. Which means that we will begin to perceive the world properly, without an inflated sense of self or sense of entitlement. We are free to stop writing scripts for the people in our life because we no

longer need them to play a certain role to fulfill us. We can free them to be them. We can enter into a relationship with them instead of guilt-tripping them and pressuring them into the version of them that we wish they would be. This free-of-charge gospel allows us to stop putting the world on trial. We can forgive and find room for the people whom we once attempted to write off and write out. Ironically, it is in giving up our entitlements and rights that we are placed in a position of being able to care about the rights and entitlements of others. We can fight not for ourselves but for others. We can put our directing skills to use for our neighbors because we've acknowledged that we were never really directing our lives anyway. (Stephen Um).

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, the more we know and focus on the star of the free-of-charge gospel, which is not us, the more free we will be to love others free of charge, to serve others even people who can't or won't do anything for us in return. That's the true measure of a man and woman of God.

Let us resolve by God's grace to stay off the director's chair and focus not on our rights, but on our responsibilities to serve others to be the best they can be to the glory of Christ. Let's live for Christ and not for entitlements and know more fully that He is our exceeding and great reward.