

The Discipline of Surrendered Freedom

1 Corinthians 9:19 (ESV) - *For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.*

1 Corinthians 9:22–23 (NLT) - *Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings.*

1 Corinthians 9:27 (NKJV) - *But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.*

Introduction – Most of us live our lives based on a question: **What am I entitled to?**

Imagine standing on a bridge that is collapsing. Behind you is safety. Ahead of you are people trapped on the other side.

You have every right to stay where you are. Nobody would blame you. Nobody would criticize you. Nobody would question your decision.

Yet love does something rights never do. **Love walks onto unstable bridges. Love absorbs inconvenience. Love accepts sacrifice. Love gives up comfort. Love crosses over.**

Paul spends this chapter asking, 'What am I willing to surrender?'

1 Corinthians 9 is one of the most counter-cultural chapters in the entire Bible because Paul teaches us that the highest expression of freedom is not getting your way. It is using your freedom to serve someone else.

- **Chapter 8: Paul told the strong to surrender rights for the weak. Chapter 9: Paul shows them what that looks like in an actual life — his own.**
- Theory in chapter 8 - Biography in chapter 9.
- He does not just instruct; he becomes the exhibit.

THE MOST PERSUASIVE ARGUMENT FOR ANY PRINCIPLE IS A LIFE THAT HAS ALREADY LIVED IT.

- Context: Corinth was a city of sophists — traveling teachers who sold wisdom for fees
 - *Rhetoric was a marketplace commodity*

- *Accepting payment = looking like every other teacher hawking wisdom for money*
- *Paul's refusal to take pay was a deliberate missionary strategy, not a sign of weakness*
- The Corinthians had questioned his apostleship — he opens the chapter defending it
- **But notice: he defends the right only to announce he is not using it**

1. The Rights He Had

1 Corinthians 9:1–6 (NLT) - *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? Even if others think I am not an apostle, I certainly am to you. You yourself are the proof that I am the Lord's apostle. This is my answer to those who question my authority. Don't we have the right to live in your homes and share your meals?*

- Paul opens by establishing three legitimate rights before surrendering all of them:
 - ***Right 1: Financial support from the churches (vv. 4–12) — scripturally grounded***
 - ***Right 2: A believing wife to travel with him (v. 5) — Peter had it, the Lord's brothers had it***
 - ***Right 3: Full-time ministry without working with his hands (v. 6)***

1 Corinthians 9:8–14 (NIV/NLT) - *Am I saying this merely on human authority? Doesn't the law say the same thing? For the law of Moses says, "You must not muzzle an ox to keep it from eating as it treads out the grain."... In the same way, the Lord ordered that those who preach the Good News should be supported by those who benefit from it.*

- Paul quotes Deuteronomy and the Lord himself to validate the right
- He is not inventing a claim — the right is real, legitimate, and God-authorized

You cannot truly give something away unless it was genuinely yours to begin with. A surrender without a real right is not sacrifice.

The power of Paul's surrender is not that he had nothing to give up. It is that he had everything to give up - and gave it up anyway.

exousia — authority, right, legitimate power — used five times in this chapter; Paul's rights were genuine

- He is not surrendering from weakness or lack of credentials
- He is surrendering from strength — full knowledge of what he possessed and full choice to release it

STRENGTH IS NOT HOLDING WHAT YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO HOLD. STRENGTH IS KNOWING WHEN TO RELEASE IT FOR SOMETHING GREATER.

N.T. Wright — Paul: A Biography, 2018

Paul's tent-making was not an embarrassment to be explained away. It was a theological statement. Every stitch was a sermon about a gospel that could not be bought, a messenger who owed nothing to the patronage system, and a freedom that served rather than consumed.

My rights were real. My surrender was a choice. And the choice was based on love.

2. The Choice He Made

1 Corinthians 9:15, 18–23 (ESV) - *But I have made no use of any of these rights... What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge... For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews... To those outside the law I became as one outside the law... To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.*

- **"But I have made no use of any of these rights"** — deliberate, voluntary, strategic
- **His reward is not money - it is the ability to present the gospel at no cost to the hearer**
adapanos — free of charge, without expense — the gospel presented with no price tag on it
 - In a city where sophists charged fees, a free gospel was itself a proclamation

- Refusing payment removed every financial obstacle between Corinth and the message

The moment the gospel looks like a transaction, you have undermined the very nature of what you are trying to say.

- Vs. 19–23 - **"All things to all people" — the most misquoted passage in the chapter**
 - *NOT: changing the message for different audiences*
 - *NOT: compromise, spinelessness, or people-pleasing*
 - *YES: changing the METHOD, the posture, the approach*
 - *YES: strategic, deliberate, love-motivated contextual ministry*

***kerdaino* — to gain, to win — used 6 times in vv. 19–22; every use refers to people, never to positions or arguments**

- Paul's obsession is not correctness - it is people
- He changed his approach for every audience because the audience was always more important than his comfort with his own method

Paul did not lower the gospel to reach people. He lowered himself.

THE MESSAGE NEVER CHANGED. THE MESSENGER KEPT CHANGING SHAPE SO THE MESSAGE COULD GET THROUGH.

THE METHOD IS NOT SACRED – THE MESSAGE IS! WHEN YOU CONFUSE THE TWO, YOU START PROTECTING THE PACKAGING AND LOSING THE PEOPLE.

- v. 23 — "I do it all for the sake of the gospel" — this is the motive that makes everything else make sense
 - *Not for applause*
 - *Not for influence*
 - *Not for personal comfort or brand*
 - *For the gospel. For the people the gospel is for.*

Rodney Stark — The Rise of Christianity, 1996

The early church did not grow primarily because of brilliant preaching or superior theology. It grew because ordinary Christians lived in ways that were inexplicably generous, served people who had no claim on them, and presented a community that the ancient world had never seen before. The servant posture was not a strategy. It was a way of life that the watching world could not explain apart from the God behind it.

3. The Discipline Required

1 Corinthians 9:24–27 (NKJV) - *Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore,*

*I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. **But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.***

The Isthmian Games — Two images: the runner and the boxer

- **held in Corinth every two years, second only to the Olympics**
- Every person in that congregation had watched these games. Paul is speaking their language.

Runner vs Boxer: everyone runs, only one wins; the discipline of training is not optional. Boxer — does not beat the air; every punch has a target; fights with purpose and precision.

You cannot run the race on Sunday and ignore the training on Monday.

The finish line is won in the ordinary days nobody sees.

The perishable crown vs. the imperishable crown — Isthmian athletes competed for a celery wreath

- *It wilted within days - Paul says: they gave everything for something that rotted. We run for something eternal.*
- ***If they disciplined their bodies for a wreath that faded, how much more should we?***

Daily discipline is the bridge between calling and completion

No one stumbles into the finish line. No one accidentally becomes who God designed them to be

1 Corinthians 9:27 (NKJV)

But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

The most sobering verse in the chapter — possibly in the letter. Paul — apostle, church planter, author of half the New Testament — says he is afraid of one thing:

YOU CAN PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THOUSANDS AND STILL MISS THE FINISH LINE YOURSELF. THE CALLING TO RUN FOR OTHERS DOES NOT EXCUSE YOU FROM RUNNING.

- The discipline he describes is the daily, **unglamorous work of keeping himself aligned** with what he preaches

A.W. Tozer — The Pursuit of God, 1948

The labor of self-discipline is never wasted. It is the pruning that makes the vine fruitful. The man who neglects it may be used of God for a season, but the man who practices it becomes a vessel that God reaches for again and again because it is always clean, always ready, always aligned with the purposes of the One who filled it.

WHAT YOU DO WHEN NO ONE IS WATCHING IS WHAT DETERMINES WHETHER YOU FINISH – THE SECRET TO SUCCESS IS HIDDEN IN YOUR DAILY ROUTINE!

DISCIPLINE IS NOT THE ENEMY OF FREEDOM. DISCIPLINE IS WHAT KEEPS YOUR FREEDOM FROM BECOMING SOMEONE ELSE'S STUMBLING BLOCK - INCLUDING YOUR OWN.

Run to finish - Three questions every person in this room must answer:

- What right are you holding that love is asking you to release?
- What are you protecting that is keeping people from the message?
- What discipline are you avoiding that is slowly disqualifying you from finishing well?