

1 CORINTHIANS 9:11

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 9. In this chapter Paul asked a number of rhetorical questions to emphasize his rights as an apostle. He started in the first two verses by proving that he was an apostle. Then in verses 3 and following he began to defend his rights as an apostle. In verse 4–6 he asked three rhetorical questions that centered on his right to have financial support. In verse 4 he talked about his right to eat and drink. In verse 5 he talked about his right to have a believing wife who would travel with him. And in verse 6 he talked about his right to refrain from working. Now both Paul and Barnabas were single and chose to work with their hands to provide for themselves. But Paul's point here was that they had these rights, just like the other apostles.

Then in verse 7 Paul asked three more rhetorical questions, and in each one he gave an illustration to defend his right to receive support as an apostle. The first one was a soldier, the second one was a farmer, and the third one was a shepherd. The soldier got his expenses covered, the farmer got to eat some fruit from his vineyard, and the shepherd got to drink some of the milk that came from the flock. So this verse proves from everyday life that Paul had the right to receive financial support for his ministry as an apostle. But it's easy to see how some people at this point might have thought that Paul's argument was weak. That's why he asked another rhetorical question in verse 8: "Am I saying this from a human perspective?" And the obvious answer to this question is "no."

Now there was nothing wrong with Paul using those illustrations. But Paul knew that his position was weak if he was relying only on those human illustrations. He didn't want to speak just from a human perspective. So at the end of verse 8 he asked another rhetorical question: "Doesn't the law also say the same thing?" And the obvious answer to this question is "yes." In verse 9 Paul gave a quote from the law of Moses and specifically from Deuteronomy 25:4: "Do not muzzle an ox while it treads out grain." A muzzle is used to keep an animal from opening its mouth. And in this case it kept an ox from eating while it was working. During ancient times an ox was used to pull a huge stone over grain that was collected and put on a threshing floor. And this stone would separate the kernels of grain from the stalks that they were attached to. Then the grain could be used to bake bread.

So it's natural that people would have wanted that grain for themselves instead of letting their ox eat it. That way they could eat it or sell it to make money. But Moses told the Israelites not to stop the ox from eating as it worked. He was basically telling them to treat their ox with kindness. But why did Paul quote this statement here in 1 Corinthians 9:9? After all, he wasn't focused on oxen in this passage. But he went on to explain how we should understand this statement. At the end of verse 9 he asked, "Is God really

concerned about oxen?” And the obvious answer to this question is “no.” So Paul seemed to be saying that God didn’t care about oxen.

Now we know from many passages of Scripture that God cares about animals. So Paul’s rhetorical question here is rather confusing. Why would he imply that God is not concerned about oxen? I think the solution here is that Paul was simply arguing from the lesser to the greater. He was saying that God doesn’t just care about oxen but that he cares about people as well. And this fact was obvious even back in the book of Deuteronomy, because the statement that Paul quoted is in a section of laws about human relationships. Most of the commands in that passage were about how to treat others, especially those who were needy. So Moses was clearly talking about how to treat oxen in this statement. But he was implying that we should treat people even better. If we should show some kindness to our animals, then we should certainly be kind to our fellow human beings as well.

And that’s clearly what Paul was focused on when he quoted this statement. In verse 10 he said, “Isn’t he really saying it for our sake? Yes, this is written for our sake, because he who plows ought to plow in hope, and he who threshes should thresh in hope of sharing the crop.” So in this verse Paul confirmed that Deuteronomy 25:4 was written more for our benefit than it was for the benefit of oxen. He talked about a person who digs up the ground to prepare for planting seeds. He also talked about a person who threshes and gets the grain ready to be used for baking. And he said that both people have a hope or a confident expectation that they will get a share of the crop. So Paul was basically teaching the principle that our work should be rewarded. That’s true for animals, and it’s true for people as well.

Now let’s look at the next verse in 1 Corinthians 9. We’re ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 11: “If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it too much if we reap material benefits from you?” In this verse we have yet another rhetorical question. We’ve already seen 14 of them in the first 10 verses. So we’re now looking at the fifteenth one in this chapter. And hopefully you remember that a rhetorical question has an obvious answer. So Paul wasn’t asking all these questions because he was looking for the answers. He was asking them because he wanted his readers to stop and think more deeply about what he was talking about.

Now this question is different from all the previous ones, because it actually contains a conditional sentence. We saw a lot of conditional sentences in chapter 8, but we’ve only seen one in chapter 9 so far. It was back in verse 2, which does not have any questions. But the conditional sentence here in verse 11 is part of a question. Now as you probably remember, a conditional sentence has two parts. One of them begins with the word “if,” and the other one sometimes begins with the word “then,” though that’s not required. But the word “if” is the key word in a conditional sentence, and normally it comes first like we have here. This word introduces a condition that must be met for the other part of the sentence to happen or to be true.

So let’s take a closer look at this condition in the beginning of verse 11. Paul said, “If we have sown spiritual things for you.” Now the Greek word for sown is normally used literally to refer to sowing seed. And Jesus told a parable that focuses on someone who sowed seed. It’s recorded for us in several places. Look

at what Jesus said in Luke 8:5–7: “A sower went out to sow his seed. As he sowed, some seed fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the sky devoured it. Other seed fell among thorns; the thorns grew up with it and choked it. Still other seed fell on good ground; when it grew up, it produced fruit: a hundred times what was sown.” So a person who sowed seed would scatter it on the ground. And the goal was that most of it would end up on soil that had been plowed. That way the seed would go under the surface of the ground where it would be protected and receive the nutrients it needed to grow into a healthy plant and produce fruit.

Now we just saw in 1 Corinthians 9:10 that Paul was talking about plowing the ground. So at first glance we might think that he was referring to literal sowing in verse 11. But when we look closer at this verse, we can see that he was speaking figuratively, because he talked about sowing spiritual things. Now the Greek word for spiritual things is used 26 times in the New Testament, but Paul wrote 24 of them, and 15 of them are in this letter. We’ve already seen the first four occurrences of this word. Let me take you back to chapter 2 and show you the first two of them. Look at what Paul said in verse 13: “We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people.”

So our Greek word appears twice at the end of this verse. One of them is translated as “spiritual things,” and the other one is translated as “spiritual people.” The difference here is that the Greek word has different suffixes that can refer to different genders. One of them is neuter, and so it refers to spiritual things. The other one is masculine, and so it refers to spiritual people. Now in chapter 9 and verse 11 the word is neuter, and so it refers to spiritual things. But Paul probably wasn’t just talking about anything that was invisible. In the New Testament this word always seems to refer to things that have to do with God’s Spirit. And that’s pretty obvious back in chapter 2 and verse 13, because Paul talked about things taught by the Spirit. So when Paul explained spiritual things to spiritual people, he was explaining things that were taught to him by God’s Spirit.

In fact, Paul also made a reference to God’s Spirit in the previous three verses. Look at chapter 2 and verse 10–12: “Now God has revealed these things to us by the Spirit, since the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except his spirit within him? In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who comes from God, so that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God.” So God has given the Holy Spirit to live in us. And one of the benefits is that we can understand God’s truth. If we didn’t have the Spirit’s help, we wouldn’t be able to do that. Look at what Paul said in verse 14: “But the person without the Spirit does not receive what comes from God’s Spirit, because it is foolishness to him; he is not able to understand it since it is evaluated spiritually.”

So unbelievers don’t have the Spirit, and therefore they can’t understand God’s truth. It’s just foolishness to them; it doesn’t make sense to them. That’s why they don’t receive it or accept it. They reject it and attack it instead. So we shouldn’t be surprised that unbelievers are so hostile toward Christianity. That’s the way Paul was at first. But once God saved him and gave him the Holy Spirit, his life changed dramatically. He wanted to speak God’s truth everywhere he went. And that’s what he did in the city of Corinth. There

was no church there before Paul arrived. But when he spoke God's Word to the Corinthians, God used it to save them and begin changing them to be more like Jesus. That's what Paul was talking about when he said that he sowed spiritual things for them.

Now the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "for you" in chapter 9 and verse 11. But other translations have different prepositions here. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have the phrase "in you." And the English Standard Version has the phrase "among you." Now the Greek text is pretty flexible here. Paul didn't actually use a preposition; he just put the pronoun in the dative case. So we can't be sure about the exact nuance that he was communicating here. But I think the Christian Standard Bible probably has the best option. Most likely Paul meant that he sowed spiritual things for their benefit. He proclaimed truths about God and his Spirit that were helpful for them. First they got saved, and then they grew in knowledge and godliness.

But notice that Paul didn't say he was the only one who sowed spiritual things for them. He used the word "we," and this word comes directly from a pronoun in the original Greek. That may not seem strange to us, but it's actually kind of unusual. Greek verbs have suffixes to indicate person and number, so people often didn't use a separate word as the subject of a verb. That's especially true when the verb was first or second person, because then there was only one word that could be the subject. It simply wasn't needed, and so when it's there, it carries a lot of emphasis. Paul was focusing a lot of attention on himself and others here. They were the people who sowed spiritual things for the Corinthians.

But who were these other people? Whom else was Paul talking about besides himself? We can't be certain, but we can certainly make our best guess. And a good place to start is by looking back at verses 4–6. Paul used the word "we" in verses 4–5, and then in verse 6 he explained whom else he was talking about besides himself. He was referring to Barnabas. So Paul may have been referring to himself and Barnabas again in verse 11. But I'm not inclined to reach this conclusion, because I don't see any evidence in Scripture that Barnabas ever visited the city of Corinth. Barnabas was definitely with Paul on his first missionary journey, but they parted company before Paul went on his second missionary journey. And that's when Paul visited the city of Corinth. So I'm not inclined to think that Barnabas sowed any spiritual things for the Corinthians.

But the possibility of Barnabas should help us think about a more likely option here. When Paul and Barnabas went their separate ways, Paul took Silas with him on his second missionary journey. And before long Timothy joined them. All three of them ministered side by side in Corinth and sowed spiritual things for the people there. So I think it's more likely that Paul was referring to Silas and Timothy along with himself in verse 11. Paul rarely ever tried to minister by himself. That was the exception, not the rule. He understood the importance of having a team of people to come alongside him and assist him. And we should follow his example today. We should look for people we can partner with in ministry. That way we'll be able to encourage each other and help each other to persevere.

So we can see that the condition Paul gave in the beginning of verse 11 has been met. Paul and his missionary team had indeed sown spiritual things for the Corinthians. Now at this point we would normally

conclude that the second part of the conditional sentence is true. But as I said earlier, this conditional sentence is unusual, because it's actually a question. So I think the point here is that since the condition has been met, now we can ask this question: "Is it too much if we reap material benefits from you?" Now the phrase "is it too much" is used in most translations. But it's not a very literal translation. The King James Version and the New King James Version have a more literal translation. They have the phrase "is it a great thing." Here's a more informal way of saying it: "Is it a big deal?"

Then Paul gave us another conditional statement in the rest of verse 11: "If we reap material benefits from you." The word "we" is emphatic here for the same reason that the word "we" is emphatic in the beginning of the verse. And once again it's probably referring to Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Now earlier Paul talked about the possibility that they sowed spiritual things for the Corinthians. And the verb that he used was in the Greek aorist tense, which is roughly equivalent to our simple past tense. But here Paul talked about the possibility that they reaped material benefits from the Corinthians. And this time he used a verb in the future tense. I could only find one translation that translates this verb literally. The King James Version has the phrase "we shall reap." Paul was talking about the possibility that he and his companions would reap in the future.

Now the Greek verb for reaping is often used literally to refer to cutting and gathering stalks of grain during harvest time. And normally this word is used alongside the Greek verb for sowing. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 6:26: "Consider the birds of the sky: They don't sow or reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them." So even though the birds don't sow or reap, God provides for them. But the Greek verb for reaping is often used figuratively. In fact, that's how Paul always used this word. It's found only here in this letter, but he did use it in a few other letters. Look at what he wrote in 2 Corinthians 9:6: "The point is this: The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously." Then Paul went on to say that God loves a cheerful giver. So he was talking about giving to the Lord's work here.

Now look at what Paul wrote in Galatians 6:7-9: "Don't be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a person sows he will also reap, because the one who sows to his flesh will reap destruction from the flesh, but the one who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit. Let us not get tired of doing good, for we will reap at the proper time if we don't give up." Once again Paul was speaking figuratively here, and verse 6 shows that he was once again talking about giving to the Lord's work. He said that the one who is taught the word should share all good things with the teacher. In other words, those who teach God's Word full time should be supported financially.

And Paul said basically the same thing in 1 Timothy 5. Look at what he wrote in verses 17-18: "The elders who are good leaders are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says: Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain, and, 'The worker is worthy of his wages.'" So in this passage Paul was talking about elders, and it's obvious that he wasn't talking about old people. Instead he was using this word to refer to church leaders. After all, he talked about elders who are good leaders. And he especially wanted to emphasize the elders who work hard at preaching and teaching. They focus a lot of attention on handling God's Word accurately.

And what Paul said about these men was that they're worthy of double honor. But he didn't just mean that we should treat them with respect. Paul showed what he meant by giving two quotations from Scripture. And the first quote should sound very familiar. It's the same statement that Paul quoted in 1 Corinthians 9:9. In both places he was quoting Deuteronomy 25:4. But the second quotation is not found in the Old Testament. Paul switched to the New Testament and quoted the words of Jesus in Luke 10:7. This is the only place where Paul gave us a quote from the New Testament. And that makes sense, because the New Testament was still being written at that time. But apparently the Gospel of Luke was already finished, and Paul recognized it as Scripture. So 1 Timothy 5:18 gives us some powerful proof that the New Testament is Scripture just like the Old Testament.

But Paul's point here was that the elders who work hard at preaching and teaching deserve to be paid for their ministry. It is not easy to teach God's Word accurately. The best teachers of Scripture have a working knowledge of Greek and Hebrew so that they can study the original text. They've studied systematic theology to help them learn how to fit difficult passages together. And they've studied church history to help them learn from the leaders of the past. But the best teachers of Scripture also know how to communicate the text in a way that people can understand. They organize their material so that it flows logically and smoothly. And they don't just tell people what the text says. They show people how they arrived at their conclusions. And they also help people to apply God's Word to their lives.

So I'm grateful that God allows for people like me to be paid for our ministry. Paul made that point pretty clear in several passages, and one of them is 1 Corinthians 9:11. In this verse he asked, "If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it too much if we reap material benefits from you?" The Greek word for material benefits is used only seven times in the New Testament, but Paul wrote six of them. Three of them are in this letter, and we already saw the first two back in chapter 3 and verse 3. Look at what Paul wrote in verses 2-3: "I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, since you were not yet ready for it. In fact, you are still not ready, because you are still worldly. For since there is envy and strife among you, are you not worldly and behaving like mere humans?"

So the Christian Standard Bible translates our Greek term with the word "worldly" both times here. And in this passage it has the idea of ungodly character. The Corinthian believers were immature, and their behavior was sinful. In chapter 3 Paul was confronting them about their divisions, but the rest of the letter shows that they were struggling in a variety of other ways as well. Now in 1 Corinthians 9:11 the Christian Standard Bible doesn't have the word "worldly." Instead it has the phrase "material benefits." And that's because there's nothing in the context here to indicate that Paul was talking about anything sinful. Instead he was just talking about material things that belong to the physical realm. And he was probably referring back to verse 4 and his right to eat and drink. He had the right to receive financial support for his ministry to the Corinthians.

So if Paul and his coworkers were to reap these material benefits from the Corinthian believers in the future, here's the question. Would it have been too much? Would it have been a great thing? Would it have been a big deal? The obvious answer is "no." It would not have been a great thing but a small thing! And the reason is that spiritual things are more important than material things. Paul was basically arguing

from the greater to the lesser here. If he sowed spiritual things for the Corinthian believers, and he certainly did, then he deserved to reap material things from them. They should not have found it unreasonable to support him and his coworkers financially.

And the same thing is true today. Now certainly there are no more apostles of Jesus, and by extension there are no more apostolic assistants like Silas and Timothy. But there are certainly elders today who are good leaders and work hard at preaching and teaching. And there are even non-elders who work hard at preaching and teaching, like seminary professors. So it's appropriate for churches and other Christian organizations to pay certain people to preach and teach God's Word. But they should focus on paying people who work hard to understand the text accurately. There are plenty of eloquent speakers out there who teach God's Word, but unfortunately many of them don't have sufficient training and don't handle God's Word accurately. Some of them even twist God's Word and tell people what they want to hear. Those people shouldn't even be teaching, much less receive financial support. But when we find good teachers, we should learn from them and support them. Let's close in prayer.