

# 1 CORINTHIANS 9:1A

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 9. Last week we finished looking at chapter 8 where Paul began talking about the issue of food sacrificed to idols. This theme is actually the main focus of chapters 9 and 10 as well. But in chapter 8 Paul gave special attention to the theme of knowledge. All Christians have some spiritual knowledge, but we have different amounts of knowledge. And some of the Corinthian believers didn't understand that an idol is nothing in the world. So when they ate food sacrificed to an idol, their weak conscience was defiled. That's because they thought that it was inherently wrong to eat food offered to idols. That's not true, but Scripture teaches that we should never go against our conscience, even though it's not perfect. Instead we should strive to have a clear conscience.

So Paul gave a warning to the Corinthian believers who did not have a weak conscience in this area. In verse 9 he said, "But be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak." As Christians we have the right to eat anything we want. We have freedom in this area and in many other areas of the Christian life. But we must be willing to let go of our rights in certain situations. We need to do everything we can to avoid being a stumbling block to our fellow believers who have a weak conscience. If we use a freedom in front of any believers who don't think that they have this freedom, then they might imitate us even though it goes against their conscience. So we need to be careful not to influence our fellow believers to do anything that they think is wrong.

And Paul led by example in this area. In verse 13 he said, "Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I won't cause my brother or sister to fall." Now when Paul talked about food causing his Christian brother or sister to fall, he wasn't speaking literally. He wasn't talking about sticking out his leg and causing someone to trip. Instead he was talking figuratively about causing believers to sin by going against their conscience. And Paul said that if food caused his brother or sister to sin, he would never again eat meat. In the original Greek this statement is very emphatic, because Paul used two different Greek words that both mean "not." Now in our language two negatives equal a positive. But in Greek two negatives was an emphatic negative. And the word "never" is an excellent way to convey that emphasis.

Now it's interesting that Paul switched from the word "food" to the word "meat" in the middle of this verse. And obviously meat is just one kind of food. But this doesn't mean that Paul was fine with causing a fellow believer to sin with other foods. And we can confirm this conclusion by looking at the only other place where this Greek word for meat is used in the New Testament. Listen to what Paul said in Romans 14:21: "It is a good thing not to eat meat, or drink wine, or do anything that makes your brother or sister

stumble.” So here in 1 Corinthians 8:13 Paul was just focusing on the specific food that was causing the most trouble. After all, most food sacrificed to idols was meat. But we know from Romans 14 that we shouldn’t do anything that would lead a fellow believer to go against their conscience.

So Paul was willing to go to extreme measures to avoid causing his fellow believers to sin. Now at first it sounds like Paul was saying that he would never eat meat again on any occasion. But I think that Paul was probably using hyperbole or exaggeration here. After all, we’re going to see in chapter 10 that Paul said it was fine to buy meat in the marketplace and eat it. So what he meant here was that he would never eat meat in the presence of any fellow believer who had a weak conscience in this area. He didn’t want them to follow his example and eat meat that might have been sacrificed to idols if they thought that it was wrong to do that. But if he was eating privately or with believers who weren’t weak in this area, then there was no problem with eating meat offered to idols.

Then Paul finished verse 13 by giving the reason that he wouldn’t eat meat if it caused a fellow believer to sin. He said, “So that I won’t cause my brother or sister to fall.” Earlier in the verse Paul talked about food causing his brother or sister to sin. But at the end of the verse he switched to a first person verb. He was focusing on the ultimate source of the problem. It wasn’t really food by itself that was the problem. It was the fact that someone was eating the food. So Paul was leading us by example here. He understood that he was personally responsible for the spiritual welfare of his fellow Christians. He knew that we need to love and encourage each other instead of leading each other into sin. And he certainly could have given us a command at this point. But instead he took a more subtle approach. He told us what he was going to do, and he was trying to motivate us to follow his example.

Now we need to be careful not to go too far with this concept of causing our brother or sister to sin. This doesn’t mean that the other person is helpless and can’t avoid sinning. We’re all responsible for our choices. When we sin against the Lord, we’re accountable for those sins, even if someone else led us to sin. But many sins involve dual responsibility. The person who sinned is responsible, but so is the one who led that person to sin. If we lead others to sin, we’re contributing to their sin. You could say that we’ve opened the door for them to walk through. So we’re not forcing them to sin, but we are influencing them. We’re setting up an obstacle for them to trip and fall on. So we need to do everything we can to avoid being a stumbling block.

Now let’s move on to 1 Corinthians 9. We’re ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 1: “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?” In this verse Paul asked four consecutive rhetorical questions. A rhetorical question is one that has an obvious answer. So the reason for asking a rhetorical question isn’t to find the answer. Instead the reason is to help people think more deeply about the issue covered in the question. So as we work our way through these four questions, we’ll make sure that we know what the answer is. But we’re also going to think about why Paul asked each question. What was the point that he was trying to make? And how do these points fit together in the context?

Now right away we should notice something about the first three questions. All three of them have the

same subject for the verb. It's the word "I." Now in the fourth question Paul switched from first person verbs to a second person verb. But even here he still used a first person pronoun in the phrase "my work." So as we move into chapter 9, Paul was continuing to talk about himself, just like he did in the last verse of chapter 8. In that verse he talked about how he didn't want to cause a brother or sister to sin. He was leading by example in this area, and in chapter 9 he talked in much more detail about his example for us.

So let's take a closer look at these rhetorical questions in verse 1. Today we'll cover the first two questions, and then next week we'll move on to the third and fourth questions. But before we look at the first question, I want to mention that a few Bible translations have a different order for these questions. In the Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible, the first question has to do with whether Paul was free. Then the second question has to do with whether Paul was an apostle. And most other Bible translations agree with this order, like the NET Bible, the New International Version, and the New Living Translation.

But in the King James Version and the New King James Version, these two questions are in reverse order. And the reason is that the translators for these versions did not follow the oldest and most reliable copies of the New Testament. The King James Version was translated over 400 years ago, and at that time our oldest copies of the New Testament hadn't even been discovered yet. In fact, the New Testament of the King James Version was based on just a small number of later copies. And apparently sometime before these later copies were made, a scribe reversed the order of these two questions. Perhaps he thought that the question about Paul being an apostle was more important and should go first. But whatever the reason was for this change, we can say with a great deal of certainty that a change was made to put the apostle question first. That's because our oldest and most reliable copies of the New Testament agree that the question about Paul being free was first.

Now you might wonder why the translators of the New King James Version didn't put these two questions in the right order. After all, this translation was completed less than 50 years ago. And Bible scholars have known about the correct order of these questions for a lot longer than that. But the translators of the New King James Version just wanted to update the language of the King James Version. They basically took the old and outdated English in the King James Version and put it into modern English. And this means that many of the problems in the King James Version are also in the New King James Version. That's why I don't recommend either one of these translations. Thankfully they don't have any liberal theology, but in my judgment they don't consistently give us a faithful representation of the original Greek in the New Testament.

So let's look at the first question in most modern Bible translations. The Christian Standard Bible says, "Am I not free?" The Greek word for free is used 23 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote 16 of them, and six of them are in this letter. We've already seen the first three of them. The last one that we saw is in chapter 7 and verse 39. Look at what Paul said in that verse: "A wife is bound as long as her husband is living. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to anyone she wants—only in the Lord." So in that verse Paul explained what a widow is free to do. She can get remarried to anyone she wants as long as the man is a Christian.

But here in chapter 9 and verse 1 Paul didn't say what he was free to do or even what he was free from. He just used the word "free" and then ended the question. So let's get some additional help and look at the first two uses of the Greek word for free in this letter. They're also found in chapter 7, and they're in consecutive verses. Look at verses 21–22: "Were you called while a slave? Don't let it concern you. But if you can become free, by all means take the opportunity. For he who is called by the Lord as a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called as a free man is Christ's slave." So in these verses Paul was clearly using the Greek word for free in contrast with being a slave. And he said that we shouldn't be concerned if we're a slave. It's not the end of the world. There's nothing inherently sinful with being a slave. But he also said that a slave should become free if possible.

And this is how Paul used the Greek word for free in the other two occurrences of this word in the letter. Look at chapter 12 and verse 13: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all given one Spirit to drink." So in this verse the word "free" just refers to the opposite of being a slave. Now let's return to chapter 9, and look at what Paul wrote in verse 19: "Although I am free from all and not anyone's slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people." Now this verse is a bit tricky to interpret, and we'll be taking a closer look at it in a few months. But for now we can just observe that Paul contrasted being free with being a slave. He did say that there was a sense in which he made himself a slave. But at the beginning of the verse he clearly said that he was free instead of being a slave.

And I think that Paul was saying the same thing in verse 1 of this chapter. He asked the question, "Am I not free?" And it should be obvious to us now that the answer is "yes." Paul was not a slave to anyone. He was not owned by any other regular human being. But why did Paul bring up this fact? I think his point was simply that he had a significant number of rights as a free person in the Roman Empire, just like we do today in the United States. And we also have a lot of freedom in the Christian life as well. The issue of food is a good example of that fact. But just because we have certain rights, it doesn't mean that we should take advantage of them. That's what Paul was talking about in chapter 8, and we're going to see that he was continuing to focus on that theme here in chapter 9 as well.

Now let's look at Paul's second rhetorical question in this verse. He asked the question, "Am I not an apostle?" The Greek word for apostle is pronounced "apostolos." So our English word is based on the sound of the Greek word, which is used 80 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote 34 of them, and 10 are found in our letter. The first occurrence of this word is actually found in the first verse of the book. And in that verse Paul clearly referred to himself as an apostle. In fact, he did that at the beginning of 9 out of his 13 letters. So the obvious answer to this question is also "yes." But what does it mean that Paul was an apostle? Let's talk about the meaning of this Greek word. It refers to someone who was an official representative. This person had the authority of the one who sent him. Now many Bible translations sometimes use the word "messenger" to translate this Greek word. But a messenger just delivers news and doesn't have any authority. A better English word that conveys the right nuance is the term "delegate." This word refers to someone who is sent to represent others and is authorized to speak on their behalf.

Now there are a few times in the New Testament where we see this Greek word used to refer to someone

who represented a church. For example, in 2 Corinthians 8:23 Paul talked about some fellow believers who were “the messengers of the churches.” So Paul was using this Greek word to refer to people who represented churches as messengers or more accurately as delegates. But normally when this Greek word is used in the New Testament, it refers to an official representative of Jesus. That’s clearly how Paul used the word in 1 Corinthians 1:1, because he said that he was “an apostle of Christ Jesus.” To be a delegate of Jesus was very significant because of what he stated about himself in Matthew 28. In verse 18 he said, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.” So the apostles of Jesus carried the highest level of spiritual authority.

But who were the other apostles of Jesus besides Paul? Well, thankfully the Gospel writers told us who some of them were. They show us that Jesus chose 12 apostles early in his earthly ministry. Turn in your Bibles to Luke 6. Look at what verses 12–16 say about Jesus: “During those days he went out to the mountain to pray and spent all night in prayer to God. When daylight came, he summoned his disciples, and he chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; James and John; Philip and Bartholomew; Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called the Zealot; Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.”

Now as far as we can tell, these 12 men were the only apostles of Jesus during his earthly ministry. But Judas Iscariot hanged himself, and so the remaining 11 apostles chose a replacement for him after Jesus ascended to heaven. That story is recorded for us in Acts chapter 1. Verse 26 tells us that a man named Matthias was selected as the new apostle. But some Bible scholars think that this selection of Matthias was a mistake. They believe that the apostles should have waited for God to choose Paul as a replacement for Judas Iscariot. Then there would have been only 12 apostles as Jesus supposedly intended. Now this view is certainly a possibility, because Acts chapter 1 is just giving us a description of what happened. It’s not necessarily telling us what should have happened. The apostles were sinners like the rest of us.

But in this case I don’t think they did anything wrong. We shouldn’t conclude that Jesus wanted only 12 apostles after his ascension just because he had only 12 before his ascension. After all, the New Testament shows clearly that there were other apostles. Turn in your Bibles to Galatians 1. In verse 18 Paul said that when he first went to Jerusalem after his conversion, he met with Cephas or Peter. Now look at what he wrote in verse 19: “But I didn’t see any of the other apostles except James, the Lord’s brother.” So we can learn from this statement that James, the half-brother of Jesus, was also an apostle. That’s what Paul implied by using the word “other.” Let me give you an illustration. Let’s say that you take a trip to the grocery store later today, and then afterwards you give your family a report about what you observed. You tell them that you saw the apples but no other fruit except for the milk. That would make no sense, right? You would need to name another fruit instead of saying “milk”! So when Paul mentioned that he didn’t see the other apostles except James, he was strongly implying that James was an apostle.

But we see a reference to another apostle of Jesus in Acts 14. This chapter records the end of Paul’s first missionary journey, and verse 14 mentions “the apostles Barnabas and Paul.” This statement is very significant, because there’s no distinction between these two men. They’re put on the same level. In fact, Barnabas is even listed before Paul! So we should not think of Paul as more important than Barnabas.

They were both apostles of Jesus. So it's obvious that there were more than just 12 apostles of Jesus. There were the original 11 apostles, and then we can add Matthias, James, Barnabas, and Paul to that list. But were there any other apostles of Jesus besides these 15 men? I think it's reasonable to conclude that there were quite a few more apostles, even though we don't know their names. After all, Paul warned in 2 Corinthians 11:13 that there were false apostles who were "disguising themselves as apostles of Christ." But they would have had a hard time pretending to be apostles if there were just a handful of true apostles.

Now some Bible scholars today think that two of these additional apostles are named in Romans 16. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 7: "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews and fellow prisoners. They are noteworthy in the eyes of the apostles, and they were in Christ before me." Notice that the Christian Standard Bible does not treat Andronicus and Junia as apostles but as well known to the apostles. But some Bible translations like the New International Version say that "they are outstanding among the apostles." So these translations are saying that Andronicus and Junia were actually apostles. Now the Greek text is ambiguous here and can be interpreted in either way. But I think it's very unlikely that they were apostles, because Junia was probably a woman and was apparently the wife of Andronicus. And we have no clear example in Scripture of a female apostle. Paul said in 1 Timothy 2:12 that a woman couldn't teach or have authority over a man. So it's very hard to see how a woman could be an apostle and carry the authority of Jesus.

But could there be any apostles alive today? This is a very important question to answer, because there are some professing believers out there right now who claim to be apostles. And these people fall into two basic groups. A few of them think that they're apostles because they're missionaries or church planters. Now certainly Paul functioned in these ways, but other apostles like James apparently did not. As far as we can tell, he just stayed in Jerusalem and ministered there. Paul was special among the apostles because God appointed him to go to the Gentiles. So we should not take Paul's experience and make it universal for all apostles. It would be better to associate modern-day missionaries and church planters with evangelists, who are mentioned in Ephesians 4:11.

But some people who claim to be apostles today think that they're on the same level as the New Testament apostles. They put themselves in the same category as people like Peter, Paul, and James. They think that they have the authority of Jesus just like the apostles of the first century. But in Ephesians 2:20 Paul referred to the apostles and the prophets as the foundation of the church. A building's foundation is laid at the beginning of the construction process. And once it's completed, it doesn't need to be laid again. In other words, there haven't been any more apostles and prophets since the beginning of the church age. We should conclude that people today who claim to be apostles are either liars or badly deceived.

So Paul reminded his readers that he was an apostle in 1 Corinthians 9:1 by using a rhetorical question. But why did he do that? And why did he ask this question right after his question about being free? I think his point was that he had even more freedom than other Christians have. As an apostle of Jesus he had certain rights that other believers didn't have. And we're going to see later in this chapter that Paul talked about some of these rights. For example, he had the right to receive financial support from the people he ministered to. But he chose not to take advantage of that right. Later we're going to see why he

made that decision, but for now I'll just point out that he was being an example to us. All believers should be willing to lay aside their rights as a Christian for the good of others.

Let me give you an example that I've mentioned before. The Bible teaches very clearly that drunkenness is a sin. In Ephesians 5:18 Paul said, "Don't get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless living." But Scripture never says that it's a sin to drink wine or other alcoholic beverages. In fact, some passages speak very positively about doing that. But many Christians believe very sincerely that it would be wrong for them to drink any alcoholic beverages. And so we should be careful not to use that freedom in their presence. We shouldn't drink any alcoholic beverages when we're with those who are weak in this area. Otherwise we might lead them to go against their conscience. So we need to be willing to give up any of our Christian freedoms for the good of our fellow believers. This is one of the ways that we can show love to them and consider them as more important than ourselves. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to do that.