

1 CORINTHIANS 9:1B–2

January 28, 2024

Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 9. In chapters 8–10 Paul was talking about the issue of food sacrificed to idols. And in chapter 8 he focused more specifically on the subject of knowledge. Some of the Corinthian believers didn't understand that an idol is nothing in the world. So they thought that it was inherently wrong to eat food sacrificed to idols. And Paul didn't want the other believers to be a stumbling block and lead them to go against their 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." So Paul was willing to go to extreme measures to avoid causing his fellow believers to sin. Now this doesn't mean that he would never eat meat again on any occasion. After all, later in chapter 10 he said that 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.

So Paul 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. Then in chapter 9 Paul continued to talk about himself, and he went into much more detail about his example to us. Look at what he 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?" So in this verse Paul asked four consecutive rhetorical questions. A rhetorical question is one that has an obvious answer. And the purpose is to help people think more deeply about the issue covered in the question.

Now last week we looked at the first two questions. So let's review them before we move into the third and fourth questions. In the first question Paul asked, "Am I not free?" Now the Greek word for free is used five other times in this letter. We looked at all of them last week, and we saw that four of them refer to the opposite of being a slave. In fact, Paul said very clearly in verse 19 of this chapter that he was free

instead of being a slave. So I think the obvious answer to his first question here in verse 1 is “yes.” But why did Paul bring up the fact that he was free? I think his point was simply that he had a lot 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. 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 he was going to continue focusing on that theme here in chapter 9 as well.

Then Paul asked a second question: “Am I not an apostle?” Now in the very first verse of this letter, Paul clearly referred to himself as an apostle. So the obvious answer to this question is also “yes.” But we need to understand what Paul meant when he called himself an apostle. The Greek word for apostle refers to someone who was an official representative. This person had the authority of the one who sent him. But Paul was no ordinary representative. In the first verse of this letter he said that he was “an apostle of Christ Jesus.” And Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. So to be an apostle of Jesus was very significant. He and the other apostles of Jesus carried the highest level of spiritual authority.

Now last week we did a brief study to figure out who the other apostles of Jesus were. We looked at the original 12 apostles in Luke’s Gospel. Peter and Andrew were brothers, and so were James and John. Then we saw Philip and Bartholomew, Matthew and Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and the two Judases. One of them was Judas the son of James, and the other one was Judas Iscariot. But Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus and then hanged himself, and so the remaining 11 apostles chose Matthias to replace him. Then we saw that there were at least two other apostles of Jesus. Acts 14:14 calls Barnabas an apostle, and Galatians 1:19 refers to James the half-brother of Jesus as an apostle. So we know of 15 men who were apostles, and I think it’s reasonable to think that there were others.

Now some Bible scholars today think that Paul referred to Andronicus and Junia as apostles in Romans 16:7. But the best interpretation of that verse is that they were well known to the apostles. After all, Junia was probably a woman, 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 of Jesus and carry his authority. And it’s also hard to see how there could be any apostles alive today. 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. So we should conclude that there haven’t been any apostles or prophets since the beginning of the church age.

So Paul reminded his readers that he was an apostle here in 1 Corinthians 9:1. 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 Paul talked about some of these rights later in the chapter. 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. Eventually we’re going to see why he made that decision, but for now we can just observe that he was being an example to us. The point is that all of us should be willing to lay aside our rights as a Christian for the good of others.

Now let's look at Paul's next rhetorical question in this verse. We're ready to cover some new material. Here's what Paul asked in his third question: "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" And once again I think the obvious answer here is "yes." We know from Acts 9 that Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus. Now at that time Paul's was an unbeliever who was known as Saul. And he was searching for the disciples of Jesus so that he could put them in prison. But look at what happened to him in verses 3-6: "As he traveled and was nearing Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul said. 'I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting,' he replied. 'But get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'"

Now this chapter doesn't actually show us what Saul was told to do. We do see that he was blinded by the light and that God sent Ananias to speak to him and restore his sight. But this chapter only records a few words from Ananias to Saul. Verse 17 says that "Ananias went and entered the house. He placed his hands on him and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road you were traveling, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.'" So there are no instructions given here. But Paul referred back to this event when he shared his testimony later in this book. And he shared more details about what Ananias said to him. Look at Acts 22:14-15: "And he said, 'The God of our ancestors has appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One, and to hear the words from his mouth, since you will be a witness for him to all people of what you have seen and heard.'"

So the point here is that Paul didn't just see Jesus. He also received instructions from Jesus through Ananias. He was to be a witness to all people about Jesus. So this event was a huge turning point in Paul's life. Beforehand he persecuted the followers of Jesus, but afterwards he encouraged people to follow Jesus. And Paul stressed the significance of this event in 1 Corinthians 9:1 with the verb tense that he used. The Greek verb for seen here is in the perfect tense, which has two nuances. It emphasizes a completed action with ongoing results. So the idea is that Paul saw Jesus in the past, but that event had a powerful impact on the rest of his life.

But why did Paul focus here on the fact that that he saw Jesus? And why did he talk about it right after he mentioned his apostleship? I think his point was that his apostleship was based on seeing the resurrected Jesus. This event provided verification for his status as an apostle. Paul was appointed directly by Jesus to represent him. And we can confirm this connection in chapter 15 of this letter. In verses 3-4 Paul reviewed the basics of the gospel: Christ died for our sins, he was buried, and he was raised on the third day. But then he gave some proof for the resurrection of Jesus. In verses 5-7 he listed some people whom Jesus appeared to, like Peter and James. Now look at what he said in verses 8-9: "Last of all, as to one born at the wrong time, he also appeared to me. For I am the least of the apostles, not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

So in verse 8 Paul mentioned the fact that Jesus appeared to him, and then in verse 9 he mentioned the fact that he was an apostle. That's because these two facts were linked together. And notice that Paul started verse 9 with the word "for." That word introduces an explanation of what Paul was talking about in verse 8. He was explaining the relevance of seeing the resurrected Jesus. That was part of the qualifica-

tions for being an apostle. But there's another detail here that's important. Paul mentioned that he was the last one to see Jesus. Now this doesn't mean that Jesus didn't reappear to people who had already seen him. For example, Jesus appeared to the apostle John and gave him some words to write to seven different churches in the book of Revelation. But no one saw Jesus for the first time after Paul did.

Now there are many people over the centuries who have claimed that Jesus appeared to them. But I think we can safely conclude that all those people were either lying or deceived. Paul clearly said that Jesus appeared last of all to him. So no one else after him saw Jesus for the first time. And what this also means is that we have further confirmation that there are no more apostles today. The last person to be appointed as an apostle of Jesus was Paul. There were a number of men who were appointed as apostles before Paul, but no one was appointed after him. Once the apostle John died at the end of the first century, there were no more apostles. And that conclusion fits perfectly with what Paul said in Ephesians 2:20 about the apostles and prophets being the foundation of the church.

Now in 1 Corinthians 9:1 Paul didn't just say that he had seen Jesus. He said that he had seen Jesus our Lord. He referred to Jesus by his name and also by one of his most important titles. The word "Lord" was one of Paul's favorite ways of describing Jesus. I counted 92 times in Paul's letters where he referred to Jesus as Lord, and 16 of them are found in 1 Corinthians. So this word is a very significant title. It normally stresses the idea of authority, and so it shows that Jesus is in charge and that we must submit to him. There's no such thing as a Christian who doesn't affirm Jesus as Lord. Acts 16:31 says that we must believe in the Lord Jesus to be saved. And Romans 10:9 says that we must confess Jesus as Lord to be saved. If we refuse to submit to Jesus as our Lord, then we're not truly saved. But Paul was fully submitted to Jesus as his Lord and Master.

Now let's look at Paul's fourth and final rhetorical question in 1 Corinthians 9:1. Look at what he asked: "Are you not my work in the Lord?" Now in English the word "you" can be singular or plural. But in Greek the second person singular pronoun is different from the second person plural pronoun. And the one that Paul used here is the plural pronoun. He was referring to all the believers in the Corinthian church. And this Greek pronoun is actually emphatic, because Paul didn't need to use it. 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 the Corinthian believers as his work in the Lord. So the obvious answer to this question is "yes," just like we saw with the first three questions.

Now the Greek word for work is very common, and it can have different nuances. Normally it's a reference to the actual work being done. In other words, it usually refers to an activity. For example, in 1 Timothy 5:20 Paul talked about widows who were well known for good works, and then he gave a list. He mentioned bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing people's feet, and helping the afflicted. But sometimes this word is a reference to the results of work. And I think that's how Paul was using it here in our passage. He was saying that the Corinthian believers were the results of his work and ministry. In 1 Corinthians 3:6 he pointed out that he was the one who planted the church in Corinth. There was no

functioning church there until he arrived and started preaching the gospel. And Acts 18:11 tells us that he taught God's Word there for a year and a half.

But Paul wasn't trying to brag here and puff himself up. Notice how he ended verse 1 here in 1 Corinthians 9. He talked about his work in the Lord. The Greek word here for Lord is the same one that Paul just used when he referred to Jesus our Lord. So once again he was talking about Jesus. He knew that his work was ineffective and meaningless without the Lord's help. That's why Paul focused his ministry on teaching God's Word. He knew that God uses biblical truth to change hearts, not man's ideas. And he knew that he needed to depend on God's strength at all times. Jesus himself told his disciples in John 15:5 that we can't do anything without him.

So why did Paul bring up the fact that the Corinthian believers were his work in the Lord? And why did he mention this fact right after he talked about seeing Jesus? We don't really need to make any guesses here, because Paul proceeded to elaborate on this last question in the next verse. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 2: "If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you, because you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord." In this verse Paul once again brought up the fact that he was an apostle. He started by using the same Greek word for apostle that we saw in verse 1. Then he ended the verse by using a Greek word that comes from the same root. And our English translations convey that nuance pretty well with the word "apostleship." Paul shifted from talking about himself as an apostle to the office of apostleship that he held.

But in the beginning of the verse he considered the possibility that he was not an apostle to some people. He started this verse with the word "if," which introduces a conditional statement. We saw lots of conditional statements in the last chapter, and now we're seeing another one here. So we need to ask whether the condition here was met. Was Paul not an apostle to others? And the word "others" must be a reference to other believers who weren't in Corinth. Now I don't think that Paul was talking about whether other believers considered him to be an apostle. I think Christians in general accepted the fact that he was an apostle of Jesus. Instead Paul was talking about whether he ministered to other believers as an apostle. And the answer is obviously "yes." Paul planted many churches and ministered to lots of believers in a variety of places.

Now this doesn't mean that Paul ministered to every believer out there. He didn't plant every church or even visit every church. Paul probably did more traveling than any other apostle, but he wasn't omnipresent! So there would have been some believers out there who would not have viewed Paul as an apostle to them. He didn't lead them to the Lord or teach God's Word to them. But Paul wasn't considering whether he ministered to every believer out there. He was just considering whether there were any other believers out there who viewed Paul as an apostle to them. And I think there clearly were. So I don't believe that this condition here in the beginning of verse 2 was met.

But even if the condition was met, Paul could take comfort in what he said next. In the middle of verse 2 he said, "At least I am to you." This phrase actually starts with a conjunction in the original Greek, and normally it means "but" and indicates a strong contrast. Now the word "but" doesn't fit very well here,

and that's why I couldn't find it in any of the Bible translations that I consult. But I did find a good alternative in a few translations. The King James Version and the New King James Version both start this phrase with the word "yet." And that word fits pretty well here. It shows the contrast between the hypothetical possibility that he was not an apostle to any other believers and the fact that he was an apostle to the believers in Corinth.

And even if Paul was not an apostle to anyone else, he would have found joy in being an apostle to the Corinthians. That would have been the silver lining for him. I love Paul's positive attitude here when he used the phrase "at least." It's so easy to get down and depressed when things aren't going well in our lives. And I'm not saying that Paul never struggled with any kind of depression. But in this case he was able to avoid that problem. And he did that by focusing on what was right in front of him. He was writing to the Corinthian believers, and he found joy in what God was doing through his ministry to them. So the next time you're tempted to get depressed during a difficult situation, look around for some people you've had a positive impact on. And thank God for using you in their lives. Maybe you haven't had a huge impact on lots of people. But you can still find joy in having at least some kind of impact on a few people.

Now let's look at the last statement in verse 2. Paul finished this verse by saying, "Because you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord." Now the Christian Standard Bible makes it sound like Paul was giving a reason that he was an apostle to the Corinthians. But that doesn't make much sense of this final statement. And besides, the Greek conjunction here normally means "for." That's the word used in the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible. So Paul was just introducing an explanation of his apostleship to the Corinthians. He was giving some additional details to confirm this point. And this statement is emphatic, because once again there's a second person plural pronoun in the original Greek that doesn't need to be here. So Paul was including it to focus extra attention on the Corinthian believers.

And Paul described these Christians as the seal of his apostleship. The Greek word for seal is used only 16 times in the New Testament, and 13 of them are in the book of Revelation. The apostle John saw a scroll with seven seals on it, and he found out that only Jesus was worthy to open the seals. Then John saw Jesus open these seals one by one, and each time a seal was broken, there was a terrible judgment that came on the earth. This vision is going to be fulfilled during the future seven-year tribulation period when God punishes the wicked. So a seal was used to protect a document so that it couldn't be opened easily. And as long as the seal wasn't broken, people would know that the contents of the document were genuine. So a seal was essentially a mark of authenticity. It testified to the validity of what was written in the document.

Now of course Paul wasn't talking about a literal seal or a literal scroll here in 1 Corinthians 9:2. He was comparing the Corinthian believers to a seal, and he was comparing his apostleship to a scroll. So he was saying that the Christians in Corinth testified to the validity of his apostleship. So Paul was just giving a second proof that he was an apostle. In verse 1 he mentioned that he saw Jesus our Lord. And certainly this fact was an important verification of his apostleship. But the existence of the Corinthian church was another significant piece of evidence. The believers in Corinth were his work in the Lord, and they were

the seal of his apostleship in the Lord. Paul ended both of these verses with the same phrase to emphasize that his ministry to the Corinthians could not have happened without the Lord's help.

But we need to remember that all of this builds on Paul's first question in verse 1 about freedom. As I mentioned earlier, Paul had the right as an apostle to receive payment for his ministry. And since he planted the church in Corinth and ministered there for so long, he certainly had the right to ask the believers there for financial support. But he did not take advantage of that right. And we need to follow his example and be willing to set aside our rights as well. We have a great deal of freedom in the Christian life, but we should never abuse that freedom by causing a weaker brother or sister to stumble and fall into sin. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help in this area.