

1 CORINTHIANS 9:3–4

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 9. In chapters 8–10 Paul was talking about the issue of food sacrificed to idols. We saw in chapter 8 that some of the Corinthian believers thought that it was inherently wrong to eat food sacrificed to idols. So Paul didn't want the other believers to be a stumbling block and lead them to go against their conscience. And Paul led by example in this area. In verse 13 he said that he would never again eat meat so that he wouldn't cause his brother or sister to fall into sin. Now he wasn't saying that he was going to become a vegetarian. He just meant that he would never eat meat in the presence of any fellow believers who had a weak conscience in this area.

Then in chapter 9 Paul continued to talk about himself, and he went into much more detail about his example to us. In verse 1 he asked four rhetorical questions, and the obvious answer to each one is "yes." Paul was free, he was an apostle, he had seen Jesus our Lord, and the Corinthian believers were his work in the Lord. So Paul was not a slave but a free person in the Roman Empire. And this means that he had a lot of rights. But as an apostle of Jesus he had even more rights than the average Christian. That's because he was an official representative of Jesus. And Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. So Paul and the other apostles carried the highest level of spiritual authority.

Then Paul mentioned two proofs of his apostleship. The first one was that he saw Jesus. Acts 9 tells us that Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus. And this event was a huge turning point in Paul's life. Beforehand he persecuted the followers of Jesus, but at this point he became a follower of Jesus himself. And he was appointed by Jesus to represent him. So this event provided verification for his status as an apostle. And we can confirm this connection in chapter 15 of this letter. In verses 5–7 Paul listed some of the people whom Jesus appeared to, like Peter and James. Then in verses 8–9 he said, "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 there's a direct link here between Paul's apostleship and the fact that he saw the resurrected Christ.

And I think it's important that Paul said he was the last one to see Jesus. Many people since the time of Paul have claimed that Jesus appeared to them. But I think we can safely conclude that all those people were either lying or deceived. No one has seen Jesus for the first time since Paul did. And so we can also conclude that Paul was the last person to be appointed as an apostle of Jesus. There have been no apostles since the end of the first century. And this conclusion fits perfectly with what Paul taught in Ephesians 2:20. He said that the apostles and the prophets were the foundation of the church. A foundation is laid at the beginning of the construction process, and once it's finished it doesn't need to be laid again.

Now at the end of 1 Corinthians 9:1 Paul gave a second proof of his apostleship. He said that the Corinthian believers were his work in the Lord. In other words, they were the results of his ministry. There was no functioning church in Corinth until he arrived and started preaching the gospel. We know from the book of Acts that he taught God's Word there for a year and a half. But Paul wasn't bragging here, because he said that the Corinthian believers were his work in the Lord. He knew that his work was ineffective and meaningless without the Lord's help. That's why he 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.

Then Paul elaborated on the fact that the Corinthian believers were his work in the Lord. In verse 2 he said, "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." So Paul considered the possibility that no other believers considered Paul to be an apostle who ministered to them. That wasn't true of course, but even if it were true, Paul would have found joy in being an apostle to the Corinthian believers. And he went on to describe them 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. The existence of the church there provided verification that he was an apostle.

But what was Paul's point in bringing up this fact? We need to remember that it flows from Paul's first question in verse 1 about freedom. As an apostle Paul had certain rights, and we're going to learn about some of those rights later in this chapter. For example, he had the right to receive financial support from the people he ministered to. And the Corinthian believers certainly would have been included. But Paul did not take advantage of that right, and we should follow his example in this area. We need to 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.

Now let's look at the next two verses in 1 Corinthians 9. We're ready to cover some new material. The next two verses are pretty short, so we shouldn't have any trouble covering both of them today. Look at what Paul wrote in verses 3-4: "My defense to those who examine me is this: Don't we have the right to eat and drink?" Now there is some debate among Bible scholars about how verse 3 fits in the context. Some of them think that the word "this" is pointing backwards to the first two verses. And the English Standard Version opens the door for this possibility. It says, "This is my defense to those who would ex-

amine me.” So the word “this” is at the beginning of the sentence, which seems to indicate that it’s pointing backwards.

But the Christian Standard Bible puts the word “this” at the end of the verse, and then there’s a colon right after it to show that it’s pointing forward to verse 4. This approach is also followed in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. And it’s based on a more literal translation of the original text, because the Greek word for this is at the end of the verse. Now Greek word order can vary to some degree, and so this argument isn’t decisive. But we would normally expect the Greek word for this to be at the beginning of a sentence. So Paul put it at the end of the statement for a reason. And I think the most likely reason is that he wanted to show that he was pointing forward.

Now this verse starts with the phrase “my defense.” So let’s talk about the Greek word for defense. It’s pronounced “apologia,” and we get several English words from this word. One of them is the word “apologetics,” which refers to defending the Christian faith. But the more common English word that we get from this Greek word is “apologize.” And what’s interesting is that this word has basically the opposite meaning of making a defense! Instead we use it to express regret about something we’ve said or done. For example, we might say, “I apologize for losing my temper.” We’re not defending ourselves; we’re basically saying that we’re sorry. In fact, we often just say “I’m sorry” in that kind of situation.

But if we’ve sinned against someone, apologizing or saying “I’m sorry” isn’t good enough. Listen to what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 7:9-10: “I now rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance. For you were grieved as God willed, so that you didn’t experience any loss from us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, but worldly grief produces death.” So Paul said that there are two kinds of grief. There’s a worldly grief that produces death, and there’s a godly grief that produces repentance. Are we sorry about our sin because we were caught? Or are we sorry about our sin because it was wrong? And does that sorrow lead us to make a change in our lives? That’s the kind of sorrow that pleases God.

So when we sin against someone, we need to do more than just apologize or say we’re sorry. We need to tell them what we’re sorry about. We need to repent and confess our sin to them. And once we’ve done that, then we need to ask them to forgive us and release us from our moral debt to them. You see, until we repent and turn away from our sin, the person we’ve sinned against is under no obligation to forgive us. In fact, the opposite is true. In Luke 17:3 Jesus said, “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” So the person we’ve sinned against needs to rebuke us for our sin. Only when we repent is that person supposed to forgive us.

And this approach is just following God’s own example. After all, that’s what the Bible commands us to do. Listen to what Paul said in Ephesians 4:32: “And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.” Now listen to what Paul said in Colossians 3:13: “Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive.” So we need to forgive others like God has forgiven us. And we know that God only forgives those who confess their sins and repent. Listen to what Jesus said in Luke 13:3: “Unless you repent, you will all perish.” And 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our

sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” So if we don’t confess our sins to God and repent, he’s not going to forgive us. Unrepentant sinners spend eternity in hell! They chose not to receive God’s gift of forgiveness.

So what this means is that forgiveness and reconciliation go hand in hand. You can’t have one without the other. If you’ve been forgiven by God, then he has reconciled you to himself. You’re no longer his enemy but his friend. And the same thing is true for human relationships as well. True forgiveness always results in reconciliation immediately. Now this doesn’t mean that we should cling to bitterness and hold a grudge against people who have sinned against us. Ephesians 4:31 teaches that we need to let all bitterness be removed from us. But the way that we get rid of bitterness isn’t by granting automatic forgiveness. Instead we focus on reaching a place where we’re ready to forgive. As soon as someone comes to us and repents, we should be able to grant forgiveness right away without hesitation. But until that time, we need to rebuke the sinner and plead with that person to repent.

Now that was a bit of a detour, but hopefully it was helpful. There’s so much misunderstanding out there on forgiveness that it’s hard for me to pass up an opportunity to teach what the Bible says about it. The world’s thinking on forgiveness is really just therapeutic in nature. It’s very self-centered because it’s focused primarily on our feelings. But biblical forgiveness is much more concerned about relationships. It’s not sufficient to feel good on the inside. We need things to be right on the outside as well. God wants us to live at peace with each other as much as possible. And he also wants people to be at peace with him. So we shouldn’t just sweep people’s sins under the rug. Instead we need to challenge them to repent so that they can be right with both God and us.

Now let’s return from our long detour to 1 Corinthians 9:3. Paul started this verse by referring to his defense. The Greek word here is “apologia,” but it doesn’t mean “to apologize”! Instead it just refers to making a defense. This Greek word is used only eight times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote five of them. It’s used only here in this letter, but Paul did use it twice in Philippians. In chapter 1 and verse 7 he said, “You are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.” Then in chapter 1 and verses 15–16 he said, “To be sure, some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of good will. These preach out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel.” So in both of these verses Paul talked about how his ministry involved defending the gospel. When people attacked the gospel, he defended it and explained it clearly and accurately. And we should do the same thing today.

But perhaps the most well known verse with the Greek word “apologia” is found in 1 Peter 3. Listen to what Peter wrote in verses 14–15: “But even if you should suffer for righteousness, you are blessed. Do not fear them or be intimidated, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” This is the verse in Scripture that’s normally associated with the word “apologetics.” It’s not just talking about defending the gospel; it’s talking about defending the Christian faith in general. And this is something that all believers should be prepared to do. Whenever someone asks us why we’re a Christian, we should be ready to give an answer.

And thankfully there are many great resources out there to help us in this area. My favorite book on apologetics is by John Frame, and it's simply called "Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief." I read this book in seminary and found it very helpful without being too difficult to read. But you don't even have to buy a book to learn how to do apologetics. Just go to the website carm.org, which stands for "Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry." This website is filled with hundreds of articles that cover tricky Bible passages and difficult theological issues. But my favorite thing about this site is the massive amount of information on false religions. I don't agree with all the theology on this site, especially in the area of eschatology. But the information on false religions is very helpful. This website will equip you to defend Christianity against attacks from all directions.

Now in 1 Corinthians 9:3 Paul talked about his defense, and he said that it was directed it to those who examined him. The Greek word for examine is used 16 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote 10 of them, and all 10 of them are right here in 1 Corinthians. But most of the other occurrences are found in the book of Acts. For example, it's used in Acts 17:11, which says that the Bereans "received the word with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." Our Greek word is translated "examined" there. It has the idea of doing a careful study. But this word can also have the nuance of judging or evaluating someone or something. And that seems to be how Paul used this word in the six occurrences we've already seen in our letter. It's used three times in chapter 2, and the Christian Standard Bible has the word "evaluate" all three times. Look at verses 14–15: "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. The spiritual person, however, can evaluate everything, and yet he himself cannot be evaluated by anyone."

Then we saw this Greek word three more times in chapter 4. Look at verses 3–4: "It is of little importance to me that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I don't even judge myself. For I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. It is the Lord who judges me." So in this passage our Greek word is translated with the word "judge" all three times in the Christian Standard Bible. He was talking about being evaluated by different people. First he said that the judgment of the Corinthian believers didn't matter very much to him. Then he said that he didn't even judge himself. Now he certainly engaged in self-evaluation, which is a good thing to do. But he didn't rely on it in the ultimate sense, because he understood that it was flawed and inconclusive. He knew that God's judgment is what really counts.

And this passage leads nicely to the next use of our Greek word in chapter 9 and verse 3. The Christian Standard Bible has the word "examine" in this verse, but I think that Paul was still talking about judging or evaluating. Some of the Corinthian believers were evaluating him, and he already said that their judgment wasn't very important to him. But it mattered enough that he wanted to defend himself. And that leads us to the beginning of his defense in verse 4. In this verse he asked a question: "Don't we have the right to eat and drink?" This is already the fifth question that we've seen in this chapter. The first four questions were all in verse 1, and they were all rhetorical questions. This just means that they have an obvious answer. We don't ask a rhetorical question because we're looking for the answer. We ask it because we want people to stop and think more deeply about what we're talking about.

Now in the first four questions Paul was focused on himself. He used the word “I” in the first three questions, and in the fourth question he used the word “my.” Both of those pronouns are first person singular. But here in verse 4 Paul changed his pronoun. He switched from first person singular to first person plural. He used the word “we” instead of the word “I.” So Paul was still talking about himself, but now he was talking about at least one other person as well. But who else was he talking about? Well, thankfully we don’t have to work too hard to find the answer. All we have to do is look down at verse 6. In that verse Paul used the phrase “Barnabas and I.” So I think it’s pretty clear that he was talking about Barnabas and himself here in verse 4.

So what did Paul say about Barnabas and himself? He asked whether they had the right to eat and drink. The Greek word for right usually means “authority.” That’s the word used in the Legacy Standard Bible. And normally the Christian Standard Bible has the word “authority” whenever this Greek word is used. But sometimes this Greek word refers to the right to do something. That’s how it’s used in John 10. Look at what Jesus said in verses 17–18: “This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” This passage is very significant, because it shows that Jesus wasn’t helpless when he died on the cross. It’s not like he was backed into a corner and forced to die against his will. But he had the right to lay down his life, and he used that right. He died voluntarily to pay for our sins.

And that’s how Paul used this word earlier in 1 Corinthians. Look at what he said in chapter 8 and verse 9: “But be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak.” In this verse Paul was talking about the right to eat food sacrificed to idols. Many of the Corinthian believers understood that an idol was nothing in the world and that it was no big deal to eat food sacrificed to idols. But some of the Corinthian believers had a weak conscience in this area and thought that it was wrong to do that. So Paul told the other believers that they needed to let go of this right whenever they were in the presence of a believer who was weak in this area. That way they wouldn’t be a stumbling block and lead this person into sin.

So Paul was probably using this Greek word with the same nuance here in chapter 9 and verse 4. He was talking about a right that he and Barnabas had. So I don’t agree with the Legacy Standard Bible here. I prefer the Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, and the New American Standard Bible instead. Now it would be easy to think that Paul was still talking about the right to eat food sacrificed to idols. After all, he went on to use the same Greek word for eat that we saw several times in chapter 8. But then he used the Greek word for “drink,” and he didn’t use that word at all in chapter 8. It’s used 14 times in this letter, but this is the first time that he used it.

So I think it’s more likely that Paul was just talking about regular eating and drinking. He was referring to his right to have daily nourishment. This interpretation can be seen clearly in some of our more dynamic equivalent translations. The New Living Translation says, “Don’t we have the right to live in your homes and share your meals?” The NET Bible says, “Do we not have the right to financial support?” So Paul was following up on the rhetorical questions that he asked in verse 1. He was building on the question about

his apostleship and asking whether he and Barnabas had the right as apostles to receive financial support from the Corinthian believers. And the obvious answer is “yes.”

Now I don't think Paul was trying to convince the Corinthian believers to support him. We're going to see later in this chapter that Paul declined to ask for financial support. The issue here seems to be that the Corinthian believers were confused. I don't think they doubted Paul's apostleship at this point. But if Paul was an apostle, why didn't he take advantage of this right that he had? So Paul wasn't really defending his right to receive financial support. He was starting with that point, but ultimately he was defending his right to decline financial support. And eventually he talked his reasons for doing that. But for now we should remember that Paul was presenting himself as an example for us. If he could give up some of his rights as an apostle, then we can give up some of our rights as a Christian for the good of our fellow believers. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to do that.