

1 CORINTHIANS 9:5

February 11, 2024

Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 9. Paul started this chapter in verse 1 by asking 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. But Paul also 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 Acts 18 that he taught God’s Word there for a year and a half. But he did his work in the Lord, which means that he was depending on the Lord. He knew that his work was ineffective and meaningless without the Lord’s help.

Then in verse 2 Paul elaborated on the fact that the Corinthian believers were his work in the Lord. He described them as the seal of his apostleship. 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. 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.

Then in verse 3 Paul talked about giving a defense to those who examined him. The Greek word for examined usually means to judge or evaluate. And we know from chapter 4 that some of the Corinthian believers were judging Paul. Now he said that their judgment wasn’t very important to him. But it mattered enough that he wanted to defend himself. Then in verse 4 we see the beginning of Paul’s defense. In this verse he asked a question: “Don’t we have the right to eat and drink?” So we saw four rhetorical questions in verse 1, and here’s another one. 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. And thankfully it's not too hard to figure out who else he was talking about. 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. And what Paul asked here was whether he and Barnabas had the right to eat and drink. Now Paul was talking about food sacrificed to idols in chapter 8. And so it would be easy to think that this is what he was talking about here as well. But he didn't make any reference to drinking in chapter 8 like he did here.

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. He was basically asking whether he and Barnabas had the right as apostles to receive financial support from the Corinthian believers. And the obvious answer is “yes.” They had the right to eat and drink without needing to do some other kind of work. 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. So the issue here seems to be that the Corinthian believers were confused. If Paul was an apostle, why didn't he take advantage of this right that he had? And we'll see that he had good reasons for doing that. But for now we can just observe that he was being an example of how to give up our Christian freedom for the good of our fellow believers. We shouldn't do anything that would lead another Christian to sin against his or her conscience.

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 5: “Don't we have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife like the other apostles, the Lord's brothers, and Cephas?” So here is yet another rhetorical question. This is now the sixth one that we've seen in this chapter, and we're going to be seeing quite a few more in the immediate future. Now remember that a rhetorical question is one that has an obvious answer. So 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 this question starts exactly the same way that the question in verse 4 starts. Both questions start with the same five words in English: “Don't we have the right?” And this repetition accurately reflects the original Greek text. In Greek both of these verses start with the same four words. So once again Paul was not just talking about himself. He used the word “we” to refer to both him and Barnabas. And he was talking about another right that both of them had. Now as I told you last week, 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. Listen to 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 back in chapter 8 of 1 Corinthians. Look at what he said in 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 used this Greek word with the same nuance in chapter 9 and verses 4–5. He was talking about some rights that he and Barnabas had. So I don’t think that the Legacy Standard Bible is correct to have the word “authority” in both of these verses. I prefer the word “right” instead, which is found not just in the Christian Standard Bible but also in the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible. So what right was Paul talking about here in verse 5? He was talking about the right to be accompanied by a believing wife. The Greek word for accompanied is used only six times in the New Testament, and this is the only one that Paul wrote. But it’s used three times in Matthew’s Gospel. Listen to what Matthew wrote in chapter 9 and verse 35: “Jesus continued going around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness.”

So in that verse our Greek word is translated “going around” It basically has the idea of traveling in various directions. That’s the normal meaning of this word. But here in 1 Corinthians 9:5 it has a slightly different nuance. It doesn’t just mean “to go around”; it means “to lead around.” It has the idea of taking someone along when traveling in various directions. So our most literal translations use the phrase “take along” in this verse. That’s what we see in the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible. Now the Christian Standard Bible is on the right track with the word “accompanied.” But this English verb is in the passive voice here, while the original Greek verb is in the active voice. So Paul wasn’t talking about letting someone come with him. He was talking about taking someone with him. And he was focused on the possibility of taking along a believing wife.

Now that phrase “believing wife” is found in all four of my favorite Bible translations: the Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible. But the original Greek text is more literally translated “a sister as a wife.” That’s what we see in a footnote for the Christian Standard Bible. And the other three translations have similar footnotes. Now the Greek word for sister usually refers to a biological sister. For example, this word is used five times in John 11 to Mary and Martha. In that chapter Jesus visited them because their brother Lazarus had just died. But then Jesus raised him back to life to show his power over death.

This word is also used in Mark 3:32. Look at what this verse says about Jesus: “A crowd was sitting around him and told him, ‘Look, your mother, your brothers, and your sisters are outside asking for you.’” So this verse is referring to the biological sisters of Jesus. Of course they were only his half-sisters since Jesus was born of a virgin. But they were still blood relatives through their mother. Now if we look at the rest of this chapter, we’ll see another way that the Greek word for sister can be used. Look at verses 33–35: “He replied to them, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ Looking at those sitting in a circle around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”

So in verse 35 Jesus used the Greek word for sister differently. He wasn’t using it literally to talk about his biological sisters. He was using it metaphorically to refer to the women who were following him and learning from him. In other words, they believed in him and were submitting to him. And his point was that these people were part of his true family. It’s much more important to have a spiritual relationship with Jesus than a biological relationship. Now if believers in Jesus make up his true family, then this means that we’re related to each other as well. We can refer to each other as brothers and sisters. Paul did that over and over in his letters, and 1 Corinthians is certainly no exception. He referred to his readers as brothers and sisters 20 times in this letter. He was emphasizing that we’re all part of God’s family.

But Paul also referred to individual believers using family terms. Look at Philemon 1–2: “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother: To Philemon our dear friend and coworker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your home.” So Paul referred to Timothy as a brother and to Apphia as a sister. And he was using these terms metaphorically to emphasize that they were fellow believers in God’s family. He did the same thing in Romans 16. Look at what he said in verse 1: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church in Cenchreae.” Now some translations refer to Phoebe as a deacon instead of a servant. But according to 1 Timothy 3:12, deacons needed to be the husband of one wife. So I agree with the Christian Standard Bible that she was a servant. But it’s easy to overlook the fact that Paul also referred to her as their sister. He was telling the believers in Rome that they were part of the same spiritual family as Phoebe, even though she lived far away from them.

And the same thing is true for us today. There are Christians all over the globe, whether they’re in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, or North America. We’re not going to meet most of them during this lifetime. But we have a special bond with them as members of God’s family. We’re going to spend eternity worshiping God with them! But thankfully we do get the chance to know some of our fellow believers before we die. And we should treasure those relationships and not take them for granted. It’s not good enough just to attend church on Sunday mornings. We need to be connecting with our fellow believers throughout the week so that we can encourage each other and minister to each other. Life is hard in this ungodly culture, and so we need to help each other stay faithful to the Lord.

So in 1 Corinthians 9:5 Paul was asking whether he and Barnabas had the right to take along a sister wherever they went. And I think it’s obvious that Paul was using the word “sister” metaphorically to refer to a fellow believer who was a woman. But he wasn’t talking about having a woman around simply to be

part of the missionary team. He was referring to having a sister as a wife. The Greek word for wife is used a little over 200 times in the New Testament, and Paul used it 64 times. But it's found a whopping 41 times in this letter! In fact, it's used 21 times in chapter 7 alone. This word always refers to a female who is an adult, but it often refers specifically to a married woman or a wife. That's how it was used throughout chapter 7, and that's the idea here in chapter 9 as well.

So the Christian Standard Bible and our other good translations are accurate to use the phrase "believing wife" here in verse 5. It's not a literal translation, but it gives us the right idea. Paul was talking about the right that he and Barnabas had as apostles to have a Christian wife. And I think the answer to his rhetorical question here is clearly "yes." He and Barnabas did have the right to be married. And the implication here is that they were not married at that time. We already know this fact about Paul from his discussion about marriage in chapter 7. Now most Bible scholars think that Paul was married before, because he was a Pharisee of Pharisees, and Pharisees were expected to be married. So if that's correct as I'm inclined to think, then either his wife divorced him, perhaps when he became a Christian, or she died.

Now we can't say for certain exactly what Paul's marital status was. All we can say for sure is that he was single when he wrote this letter. And now we can see that Barnabas was also single at that time. But the point here is that they didn't have to stay single. They could have gotten married if they wanted to. But they would have needed to marry a believer. And they weren't held to a higher standard in this area; the same thing is true for Christians in general. In chapter 7 and verse 39 Paul said that "a widow is free to be married to anyone she wants—only in the Lord." Now if we're already married when we get saved, and our spouse remains an unbeliever, then we should stay in the marriage and be a good testimony to our spouse. That's what Paul taught in chapter 7 and verses 12–14. But then in verse 15 he said that if the unbeliever wants to leave the marriage and get divorced, then we shouldn't fight it. And then after the divorce we're free to get married to a believer.

So in chapter 9 and verse 5 Paul was talking about his right as an apostle to be married. And he closed this verse by giving some examples to defend his freedom in this area. He said, "Like the other apostles, the Lord's brothers, and Cephas." The Greek word for apostles is the same one that Paul just used in verses 1–2. And once again he was talking about apostles of Jesus who represented him and carried his authority. But Paul was referring specifically to the other apostles besides Barnabas and him. We talked about these men a few weeks ago. They would have included the original 11 apostles along with men like Matthias and James the brother of Jesus. Apparently all of these men had a believing wife. And by the way, this statement confirms the view that only men could be apostles of Jesus and carry his authority. Otherwise he would have referred to a believing wife or a believing husband. But he only referred to a believing wife.

So first Paul gave the example of the other apostles, and then he mentioned the Lord's brothers. The word "Lord" is clearly a reference to Jesus here, just like it was in verses 1–2. This word was one of Paul's favorite titles for Jesus. It stresses Jesus is our master and that we must submit to him. But here Paul was focused on the brothers of Jesus, and I think that he was using the word "brothers" literally. We saw earlier that Jesus had biological brothers and sisters. We didn't see their names, but there are other passages that

give us the names of his brothers. One of them is Matthew 13. Look at what verses 54–55 tell us about Jesus: “He went to his hometown and began to teach them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother called Mary, and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas?”

So here we can see that Jesus had four brothers. We already knew about James, but now we can learn about the other three brothers. We also see these men listed in Mark 6, which is a parallel passage. Look at what verse 3 says about Jesus: “Isn’t this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon? And aren’t his sisters here with us?” So they were offended by him.” Notice that Joseph is called James here, which is a very similar name. Most likely Joseph was his real name, but he went by James to distinguish him from his father, who was also named Joseph. We can also see here that the order of the last two sons is reversed. So we can be pretty sure that James and James were the oldest sons after Jesus, but we can’t be sure whether Simon or Judas was the youngest.

But we can be pretty certain that Judas is the same person as Jude, who wrote one of the letters in the New Testament. In the first verse of his letter he said that he was the brother of James. He could have referred to himself as the brother of Jesus, but instead he called himself a slave of Jesus. He humbled himself and acknowledged that he needed to submit to Jesus just like every other Christian. Now some people might argue that Judas and Jude are different names, but in the original Greek they’re spelled exactly the same way. It’s just tradition that we shorten Judas to Jude for the Lord’s brother. Perhaps that was to distance him from Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus. But I think we can be pretty certain that the Jude who wrote a New Testament letter was a brother of Jesus.

Now before we finish this verse, let’s not miss the fact that 1 Corinthians 9:5 disproves the perpetual virginity of Mary. That’s one of the many false doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. Mary did not remain a virgin for the rest of her life after Jesus was born. She had other children as well. We don’t know how many daughters she had, but she clearly had four other sons. Now some scholars try to defend this false doctrine by claiming that the siblings of Jesus were just children of Joseph from a previous marriage. But where were they when Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus? And Matthew 1:25 says that Joseph kept Mary as a virgin until she gave birth to Jesus. So the implication is clearly that they had sexual relations after his birth like any other married couple. And since Mary was pretty young at that point, we would certainly expect her to have other children.

So in 1 Corinthians 9:5 Paul gave the example of the other apostles, and then he mentioned the Lord’s brothers. Finally, he closed this verse by referring to Cephas. This name is used nine times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote eight of them. Four of them are in Galatians, and the other four are in this letter. We’ve already seen the first two occurrences. The first one was in chapter 1 and verse 22, and the second one was in chapter 3 and verse 22. And Cephas was just Peter’s name in the Aramaic language. It means “rock,” just like the word “Peter,” which is based on his Greek name. But the point here in chapter 9 and verse 5 is that Peter was married. That shouldn’t surprise us, because the first three Gospels all make reference to his mother-in-law. You can’t have a mother-in-law unless you have a wife! So Peter was not celibate like the Roman Catholics claim.

Now Paul already referred to the other apostles earlier in this verse. So why did he mention Peter specifically? And why did he make an indirect reference to James the brother of Jesus? Weren't they already included in the reference to the other apostles? The answer is obviously yes. But I think Paul wanted to give some examples of some specific apostles. Peter was probably the most well known apostle, and James wasn't far behind. So I think Paul was implying here that the other brothers of Jesus were also apostles. We can't say that for certain, but it makes good sense. It certainly helps us to make sense of how Jude thought that he had the authority to write a letter to believers.

So Paul claimed that he and Barnabas had the right as apostles to take along a believing wife. And this doesn't just mean that they had the right to get married. It also means that they had the right to take a wife with them as they traveled from place to place and served the Lord. After all, a husband and wife are companions, and so it's not good for them to be separated for long periods of time. That's a good principle for us to follow today as well. But the point here isn't ultimately that they had the right to get married and take their wife with them as they traveled. The point is that they had the right to expect financial support, not just for themselves but for their wife as well. That's the main focus in this context. But we're going to see that Paul didn't take advantage of this right. He gave up this right, and the point is that we also need to be willing to give up some of our Christian rights for the good of our fellow believers. Let's close in prayer.