

# 1 CORINTHIANS 9:6

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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, and he was an apostle. Then he backed up his apostleship by saying that he had seen Jesus our Lord and that the Corinthian believers were his work in the Lord. Then in verse 2 Paul elaborated on the last question in verse 1, and he described the Corinthian believers 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. So Paul was saying that the Corinthian believers testified to the validity of his apostleship.

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 to him that he wanted to defend himself. So in verse 4 we see the beginning of Paul’s defense. In this verse he asked, “Don’t we have the right to eat and drink?” Here’s another rhetorical question, but this time Paul used the word “we” instead of the word “I.” And it’s pretty clear from verse 6 that he was talking about Barnabas and himself. He was referring to their right to have daily nourishment, and so the obvious answer to this question is “yes.” They had the right as apostles to receive financial support from the Corinthian believers so that they could eat and drink without needing to do some other kind of work.

Then in verse 5 Paul asked another rhetorical question: “Don’t we have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife like the other apostles, the Lord’s brothers, and Cephas?” Once again the obvious answer is “yes.” Paul was referring to another right that he and Barnabas had as apostles. They had the right to be married, which implies that they were single at that time. But they could have gotten married if they wanted to, as long as they married a believer. And Paul defended their freedom in this area by giving some examples. He referred to the other apostles, the Lord’s brothers, and Cephas. The other apostles would have included the original 11 apostles of Jesus along with men like Matthias and James the brother of Jesus. And the point here is that apparently all of these men had a believing wife.

But Paul also mentioned the Lord’s brothers, which is a reference to the half-brothers of Jesus. According to Mark 6:3, their names were James, Joses, Judas, and Simon. James was a very prominent apostle, and he wrote one of our New Testament letters. But Judas also wrote a New Testament letter. We just abbrevi-

ate his name in that letter and call him “Jude.” But the point here is that all four of these men were married. Then Paul finished this verse by referring to Cephas, which was another name for Peter. Now we shouldn’t be surprised that Peter was married, because the first three Gospels all mention his mother-in-law. And of course you can’t have a mother-in-law unless you have a wife!

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 be accompanied by 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 passage.

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 6: “Or do only Barnabas and I have no right to refrain from working?” So here is yet another rhetorical question. This is now the seventh 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 Paul wasn’t asking all these rhetorical questions because he was looking for the answers. He was asking these questions because he wanted his readers to stop and think more deeply about what he was talking about.

Now the last two questions in the previous two verses start in exactly the same way. Both of them start with this phrase: “Don’t we have the right?” But in verse 6 Paul took a different approach. He started with the word “or,” which normally introduces an alternative. For example, if you go out to eat for breakfast, you might be given the choice to have either bacon or sausage with your meal. Bacon is one option, but an alternative option is sausage. So in this verse Paul was approaching the subject of his rights as an apostle from an alternative point of view. He used the same Greek word for right in this verse that we saw in the last two verses. But this time he talked about having no right to do something. So he was approaching this situation from the opposite perspective.

But once again Paul was not just talking about himself. In the last two verses he used the word “we,” and we’ve already deduced that he was talking about himself and Barnabas. That’s because he made that fact very clear here in this verse. He used the phrase “Barnabas and I.” Now the name “Barnabas” is used 28 times in the New Testament, but it’s used only here in this letter. Paul did use it in Galatians and Colos-

sians as well, but most of the other occurrences are in Acts. And all of them refer to the same person. So let's do a survey of what we know about this man from Scripture. The first place where he's mentioned is Acts 4. Let's look at verses 36–37: "Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus by birth, the one the apostles called Barnabas (which is translated Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet."

So in this passage we learn some interesting things about Barnabas. First of all, we learn that his name means "son of encouragement." But we can also see that his original name was Joseph and that he was from the tribe of Levi. And what we learn about him right away is that he was generous. He sold a field and then gave the money to the apostles. But why was he called Barnabas instead of Joseph? Well, I think it's pretty obvious that it must have had something to do with the meaning of his new name. I suspect that he was pretty well known to be an encouraging person. I'm sure that the apostles were encouraged when he gave all that money to them!

But we can get further confirmation of the fact that Barnabas was an encouraging person in Acts 9, which is the second place where we see Barnabas mentioned in Scripture. This is the chapter that records the conversion of Paul, who was called Saul at this point. After he got saved on the road to Damascus, he stayed in Damascus for a while and preached the gospel there. After a while the Jews tried to kill him, but he was able to escape. Look at what happened next in verses 26–27: "When he arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, since they did not believe he was a disciple. Barnabas, however, took him and brought him to the apostles and explained to them how Saul had seen the Lord on the road and that the Lord had talked to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus."

So Barnabas was the one who facilitated the introduction of Paul to the other apostles. They didn't believe that he had really become a Christian. But Barnabas did, and he was able to convince them that Paul was a genuine believer. So it's not hard to imagine how encouraged Paul must have been at this intervention by Barnabas. And I think that the other apostles were ultimately encouraged as well. Now the next time that Barnabas appears in Scripture is in Acts 11. In this chapter we learn that a large number of Greeks in the city of Antioch got saved. This was shortly after the conversion of Cornelius and a number of other Gentiles through the preaching of Peter in chapter 10.

So chapter 11 shows us that more Gentiles were getting saved. Now look at what happened in verses 22–26: "News about them reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch. When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers of people were added to the Lord. Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul, and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught large numbers. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch."

So here we can clearly see the encouragement of Barnabas on display. First we're told that he was able to encourage the new Gentile believers in Antioch. I think that's why he was the one chosen by the church

in Jerusalem to go there. The leaders knew that he was especially gifted by God to encourage people. But Barnabas didn't just encourage these new Gentile believers in Antioch. He was also able to encourage his friend Paul. When more and more people got saved in Antioch, he decided to find Paul and bring him to Antioch to help with the ministry there. So Barnabas didn't just introduce Paul to the apostles. He also helped Paul get involved in ministry at a thriving church. They served side by side and taught God's Word for a year in Antioch.

And from this point on Barnabas is always mentioned alongside Paul in the book of Acts. In chapter 11 and verse 30 we see that they traveled to Judea together to bring some financial assistance to the believers there. Then chapter 12 and verse 25 says that they traveled to Jerusalem, probably to give the church there an update about their ministry. Then in chapter 13 we can see that they were back in Antioch. Verse 1 tells us that they were among the prophets and teachers in the church there. But then there's a huge turning point in this book. Look at verses 2–3: "As they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" Then after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off."

This is the beginning of what we call Paul's first missionary journey. It's recorded for us in chapters 13–14. And in these two chapters Paul and Barnabas were joined at the hip. They traveled to a number of towns in modern-day Turkey and preached the gospel wherever they went. And with God's help they were able to establish churches in many of those towns. Then in chapter 15 they traveled to Jerusalem together to engage in a debate about whether the Gentile believers had to be circumcised. And their testimony about how God worked through them on their missionary trip was vital. It helped the apostles and the elders conclude correctly that it was not necessary for believers to be circumcised. So Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and taught God's Word there once again.

But then something happened to disrupt this ministry partnership. Look at chapter 15 and verses 36–41: "After some time had passed, Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let's go back and visit the brothers and sisters in every town where we have preached the word of the Lord and see how they're doing.' Barnabas wanted to take along John who was called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take along this man who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone on with them to the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed off to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and departed, after being commended by the brothers and sisters to the grace of the Lord. He traveled through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."

This is the last place where we see Barnabas mentioned in the book of Acts. Now this fact doesn't mean that Barnabas was wrong in this disagreement. It's just that Luke, who wrote this book, chose to focus his attention primarily on Paul. And he continued to focus on Paul for the rest of the book. So I don't think we should say that either Paul or Barnabas was wrong here. They just had a difference of opinion about whether Mark should have come along on this missionary trip. And I think you can make good arguments for both views. Barnabas was an encourager, and so I'm sure he wanted to be patient with Mark and give him another chance. But Paul probably didn't want to risk having Mark abandon them again on a dangerous and difficult trip.

So this was a matter of wisdom and not a matter of right and wrong. And I think they handled this issue in the right way. They discussed it together and tried to persuade each other. And when they couldn't reach an agreement on this matter, they went their separate ways. They realized that their disagreement was significant enough that they couldn't work together anymore. But they continued to serve the Lord faithfully. Barnabas and Mark went to one place, and Paul took Silas with him and went to another place. So there are times when genuine believers can't reach unity despite their best efforts. We should certainly strive for agreement as much as possible on matters of doctrine and church practice. But we can't always get on the same page. Sometimes the reason is that we're still sinners and that we struggle with pride. But sometimes the reason is that we're just limited in our understanding. Or maybe we have a difference of opinion in an area where God has given us freedom.

Now if the issue isn't very important, we should be able to continue working together. But sometimes the issue is important enough that we decide to work separately, like Paul and Barnabas did. This is part of the reason that there are so many different denominations today. Now unfortunately many denominations have abandoned the gospel and are following the world's definition of what is right and wrong. So I think we can safely say that those denominations are not truly Christian anymore. Most of the people in those churches are not genuine believers. But there are still some denominations that preach the gospel and teach biblical standards of morality. They just disagree with each other about some secondary issues, like how the church should be governed and what place Israel has in God's plans for the future. There's room for Christians to disagree with each other about those issues. But it would be hard to function very well as a church without some significant unity in those areas.

So there are times when it makes sense for true believers to minister separately like Paul and Barnabas did. But we shouldn't overreact and treat each other like enemies. Some people imagine that Paul was so angry with Barnabas that he wouldn't say another kind word about him. But what we can see in 1 Corinthians 9 is that this wasn't the case. Paul wrote this letter several years after his disagreement with Barnabas, and yet he spoke positively about him. He didn't criticize him in any way. In fact, he spoke as though they were still partners. And that was true in a sense. They were both serving the same Lord and preaching the same gospel. They just weren't doing it together. But they still had enough unity that Paul could mention them side by side in verse 5.

Now most translations have the phrase "Barnabas and I" in this verse. But in the original Greek the order is actually "I and Barnabas." I only found two translations that give us a literal translation here: the King James Version and the New International Version, strangely enough. But this order doesn't conform to the rules of English style. We're taught at a young age in English class that we should always list ourselves last. That's why most translations put Barnabas first. But in the original Greek Paul put himself first for emphasis. He wanted to stress that he was focused mainly on himself here. But what he was saying was certainly true about both of them. In fact, he used the word "only" to stress that he was talking only about the two of them and none of the other apostles.

And as I mentioned earlier, Paul's focus here was once again on their rights as apostles. He used the same Greek word for right that we saw in the last two verses. But this time he turned things around and asked

whether they did not have a certain right. And the right that he was talking about was the right to refrain from working. The phrase “refrain from working” more literally means “not to work.” So Paul actually used the word “not” twice here. He was asking whether he and Barnabas did not have the right not to work. That’s a bit confusing to wrap our minds around, so I like what the Christian Standard Bible and most other translations have done here. It’s much easier for us to understand a sentence that uses the word “not” only once.

Now the Greek word for working here is a verb, and it’s used four times in this letter. We’ve already seen it back in chapter 4 and verse 12, where Paul said that he labored, working with his hands. And he said something similar in Acts 20. In verse 34 he said, “You yourselves know that I worked with my own hands to support myself and those who are with me.” So in that verse Paul didn’t just say that he worked with his hands. He also told us why he did that. He worked to support himself as well as the men who were on his missionary team. And Acts 18 tells us more precisely what kind of work Paul did with his hands. Listen to what verses 2–3 tell us about Paul when he arrived in Corinth: “He found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul came to them, and since they were of the same occupation, tentmakers by trade, he stayed with them and worked.”

So Paul made tents to support himself and the rest of his missionary team. And that’s what he was talking about in 1 Corinthians 9:6. Now certainly it’s hard work to serve the Lord. After all, Paul said in verse 1 of this chapter that the Corinthian believers were his work in the Lord. The Greek word for work there is a noun that comes from the same root as the verb in verse 6. But of course Paul wasn’t talking about his right to serve the Lord here in verse 6. He was talking about his right to work as a tentmaker. Now we don’t know if Barnabas also worked as a tentmaker. But he must have done some kind of work with his hands to support himself. Otherwise Paul wouldn’t have mentioned him here.

So in verse 6 Paul was basically asking whether he and Barnabas worked and supported themselves because they didn’t have the right to refrain from working. Were they the only apostles who didn’t have the right to receive financial support? The answer to this question is no, but we need to understand it correctly. Paul wasn’t saying that there were other apostles who also didn’t have that right. He was denying the whole premise of the question. He was saying that he and Barnabas had the right to receive financial support. So in verses 4–6 Paul was focused on the same basic right in each verse. He was just viewing that right from different perspectives. First in verse 4 he talked about having the support to be able to eat and drink. Then in verse 5 he talked about having the support to be able to have a wife and take her with him on his missionary journeys. Finally, in verse 6 he talked about having the support to be able to refrain from working with his hands.

But Paul did not take advantage of that right, and neither did Barnabas. Perhaps they even developed this conviction together during their first missionary journey. On this issue they were unified, and this fact must have already been well known to the Corinthian believers. And apparently Paul and Barnabas were the only apostles who took this approach. They were the only ones who worked to support themselves. Now eventually we’re going to find out why Paul chose to support himself. But his point here was that he

had the right as an apostle to be supported by the Corinthian believers. However, he didn't take advantage of that right, and he was being an example to us. We all have rights as Christians that we need to be willing to give up for the good of our fellow believers so that they don't sin against their conscience. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to be willing to give up our rights.