

# 1 CORINTHIANS 9:7

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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!

So Paul claimed that he and Barnabas had the right as apostles to be accompanied by a believing wife. And he wasn’t just saying that they had the right to get married. He was also saying 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 married couples 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.

Then in verse 6 Paul asked yet another rhetorical question: “Or do only Barnabas and I have no right to refrain from working?” Here’s where Paul made it clear that he was referring to Barnabas as well as himself. And these two men were closely connected for quite a while. After Paul got saved and was appointed to be an apostle, Barnabas was the one who introduced him to the other apostles. They ended up teaching God’s Word side by side in Antioch, and then they went on a missionary journey together. But then they had a disagreement about whether to take John Mark along on their next missionary journey. He had deserted them on their first trip, so Paul didn’t want him to come along, but Barnabas wanted to give him another chance. They couldn’t reach an agreement, and as a result they parted ways.

Now it would be easy to think that Paul was so angry with Barnabas that he wouldn’t say another kind word about him. But we can see here in verse 6 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. Instead Paul indicated with this rhetorical question that they had the same approach about working. Now we know from other passages that Paul was a tentmaker, and Barnabas may have been as well. But either way he must have done some kind of work with his hands to support himself. And apparently they were the only apostles who did that. Perhaps they even developed this conviction together during their missionary journey.

So in this verse 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 on his missionary journeys. Finally, in verse 6 he talked about having the support to be able to refrain from working with his hands.

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 7: "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its fruit? Or who shepherds a flock and does not drink the milk from the flock?" So in this verse we have three more rhetorical questions. We've already seen seven of them in this chapter, and now we're up to ten of them. Paul was really on a roll at this point! 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.

So in this verse Paul gave three illustrations to defend his right to receive support as an apostle. And these three illustrations are focused on different situations in everyday life during the first century. The first one is a soldier, the second one is a farmer, and the third one is a shepherd. So let's look at the first illustration, which is focused on a soldier. Paul asked, "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?" The phrase "serves as a soldier" comes from one Greek word, and it's a verb. This verb is used only seven times in the New Testament, and it can be used in two ways. It can be used literally to talk about doing military service, or it can be used figuratively to talk about engaging in a conflict.

And the figurative nuance is actually more common in the New Testament. Listen to 1 Timothy 1:18–19: "Timothy, my son, I am giving you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies previously made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the good fight, having faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and have shipwrecked the faith." So in this passage Paul told Timothy to fight the good fight. And he wasn't talking about a literal battle with literal swords. Instead he was talking about a spiritual battle. Timothy needed to resist the devil and serve the Lord faithfully. He needed to focus on trusting God and not going against his conscience.

We also see this Greek word used figuratively in 1 Peter 2. Listen to what Peter wrote in verse 11: "Dear friends, I urge you as strangers and exiles to abstain from sinful desires that wage war against the soul." So in this verse Peter warned us about sinful desires that can sneak into our hearts. And he said that these desires wage war against the soul. They attack us and try to bring spiritual harm on us. So we need to abstain from these sinful desires and make every effort to avoid giving in to them. So sometimes the New Testament uses this Greek word to talk about the spiritual war that we're in. We're constantly fighting to avoid sin and to defend the Christian faith. But sometimes this Greek word is used literally to refer to doing military service. Listen to 2 Timothy 2:4: "No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in the concerns of civilian life; he seeks to please the commanding officer."

In that verse Paul was using the example of serving as a soldier to motivate Timothy to stay focused on serving the Lord faithfully. Timothy apparently had a tendency to shy away from suffering, and so when things got difficult, he would retreat and stay silent. But Paul told Timothy in the previous verse that he needed to be willing to suffer as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. We also see our Greek word used in Luke 3:14: "Some soldiers also questioned him, 'What should we do?' He said to them, 'Don't take money from anyone by force or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'" In this verse John the Baptist was interacting with some Roman soldiers. They were dedicated to doing military service, but they also

wanted to know what it looked like for them to repent from their sins. So John focused on the theme of money. He told them not to use their position of power to steal, and he told them to be content. They had a salary for working as a soldier, and they needed to be satisfied with their wages.

So there are a few places in the New Testament that use our Greek word literally to talk about doing military service. And that's clearly how Paul was using it in 1 Corinthians 9:7 as well. He was referring to a soldier as an illustration, just like he later did in 2 Timothy 2:4. In that verse he used it to motivate Timothy to suffer for Christ, and in this verse he used it to defend his right as an apostle to support. He asked this rhetorical question: "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?" The Greek word for expense is used only four times in the New Testament, and it refers to pay or wages. This is the word used in Romans 6:23, where Paul said that the wages of sin is death. When we sin, it's kind of like working a job. But instead of making money, we get paid with death instead. We're separated from God because of our sins. But thankfully the rest of the verse says that the gift of eternal life is available to us through Jesus.

Now this Greek word for wages is also used in Luke 3:14, which I just read. That's where John the Baptist told the Roman soldiers to be satisfied with their wages. Soldiers didn't make a lot of money back in those days, and things haven't really changed today. So there was a temptation for soldiers to take advantage of ways to get extra money, even if they were unethical. And John said that the soldiers needed to repent of those sinful actions. Now in 1 Corinthians 9:7 Paul wasn't focused on that particular problem. He was just pointing out that soldiers got paid for their military service. So the answer to the rhetorical question here is clearly "no one." No one serves as a soldier at his own expense. Soldiers got enough money to cover their basic needs.

Now the Christian Standard Bible skips over a Greek word in the original text, and so does the English Standard Version. These translations match each other word for word. And the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible are almost exactly the same as these two translations. But both of them add the phrase "at any time" right after the word "who." That phrase adds emphasis to this question. It indicates that there's no time that a soldier ever serves at his own expense. Now certainly there is such a thing as a militia with volunteer soldiers who are prepared to take action in an emergency. But Paul was talking about full-time soldiers here who don't have another job. They get paid for their work, and if they don't, they can't survive.

So in Paul's first rhetorical question he gave the illustration of a soldier. Then in his second rhetorical question he gave the illustration of a farmer. He asked, "Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its fruit?" The Greek verb for plants is used only 11 times in the New Testament, but Paul used it four times, and all of them are in this letter. We've already seen the first three occurrences back in chapter 3. Look at what Paul wrote in verses 6–8: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So, then, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his own reward according to his own labor."

Now in this passage Paul was not using the Greek word for planting literally. There's no evidence anywhere else in Scripture that Paul was an amateur gardener. And Paul didn't use a direct object after any of

the three uses of this verb here. If Paul had been speaking literally here, we would expect to see a reference to some kind of tree or vegetation. So in this passage Paul was using the image of planting as a metaphor for his ministry in Corinth. He was stressing the fact that he started the church there. After all, planting is the first step in the gardening process. So it's natural to use this figure of speech to refer to starting something. Even today we often use the phrase "church planting" when we talk about starting a church. That image can be traced back to this passage.

But normally the Greek word for planting is used literally in the New Testament. That's how it's used in all seven occurrences outside of Paul's letters. They're all found in the Gospels on the lips of Jesus. On one occasion he told a parable about a landowner who planted a vineyard but had difficulty collecting fruit from it. This parable is recorded in Matthew 21, Mark 12, and Luke 20. The point of this parable was that God planted Israel as a vineyard, but the leaders rebelled against him. When he sent prophets to confront them about their sin, they killed these messengers from God. He even sent his Son to them, and the leaders murdered him as well. So God would bring judgment on them. And Jesus would not set up his earthly kingdom during their lifetime. In fact, we're still waiting for him to return and rule on earth.

So in this parable someone planted a vineyard, and Paul was talking about the same thing in 1 Corinthians 9:7. It's obvious that he was using the Greek word for planting literally, because he talked about what was being planted. He referred to planting a vineyard. The Greek word for vineyard is used 23 times in the New Testament, but Paul used it only here. In fact, all the other occurrences of this word are in the Gospels. Most of them are actually used in the parable that I just told you about. A vineyard is just a piece of land where grapes are grown. The grapes could be eaten as they were, or they could be turned into raisins or wine. We actually have a lot of vineyards in California. Apparently vineyards in California cover about 550,000 acres of land, and 90% of the wine made in our country comes from these vineyards.

But why did Paul talk about planting a vineyard in this verse? He asked if anyone plants a vineyard and does not eat its fruit. The Greek word for fruit is used 66 times in the New Testament, so it's a pretty common word. It's found only here in 1 Corinthians, but Paul did use it 10 times in his other letters. And most of those passages are using the word figuratively. For example, in Galatians 5:22 Paul referred to the fruit of the Spirit, and then he listed a series of attributes like love, joy, and peace. But he did use this word literally in 2 Timothy 2. I read verse 4 earlier, but now listen to verse 6. Paul said that "the hard-working farmer ought to be the first to get a share of the crops." The Greek word for crops there literally means "fruit." And Paul's point there was that Timothy needed to work hard in his ministry. And as I mentioned earlier, the point in this passage is that he needed to be willing to suffer.

But it's interesting that Paul stated in this verse that a farmer should get a share of the crops. It's expected that he would eat some of the fruit. And that's exactly what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 9:7. He asked, "Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its fruit?" And the obvious answer is "no one." Now of course the farmer isn't going to eat all the fruit. But he is going to eat some of the fruit. It would be absurd to suggest that he shouldn't do that. We even see this principle taught back in the Old Testament. Listen to Deuteronomy 20:6: "Has any man planted a vineyard and not begun to enjoy its fruit? Let him leave and return home. Otherwise he may die in battle and another man enjoy its fruit." So an Israelite man

didn't have to serve in the army if he had just planted a vineyard. He had the right to stay home and wait for some fruit to come so that he could enjoy it.

We find the same principle in Proverbs 27. Listen to verse 18: "Whoever tends a fig tree will eat its fruit, and whoever looks after his master will be honored." So this verse is talking about tending a fig tree instead of planting a vineyard. But the same principle applies. Either way the person has the right to eat some of the fruit. So in 1 Corinthians 9:7 Paul asked three rhetorical questions. And in each question he used an illustration to defend his right to receive support. The first one was a soldier, and the second one was a farmer. Now let's look at the third and final rhetorical question, which uses the illustration of a shepherd. Paul asked, "Or who shepherds a flock and does not drink the milk from the flock?"

Paul started this question with the word "or," just like he did with the question in the previous verse. And this word is very appropriate here, because Paul was just giving us an alternative illustration. He was showing us another way of viewing the situation regarding his right for support. Now the Greek verb for shepherds is used 11 times in the New Testament. It's found only here in Paul's letters, but we do find it on his lips in Acts 20. Listen to what he said to the elders of the Ephesian church in verse 28: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood."

So in this verse Paul commanded these elders to shepherd the church of God. Now obviously the church isn't made up of literal sheep. So Paul was using the verb "shepherd" figuratively. He was talking about watching over believers to lead and protect them spiritually. And that's how this Greek word is normally used in the New Testament. But in 1 Corinthians 9:7 Paul clearly used this word literally, because he talked about shepherding a flock and drinking the milk from the flock. The Greek word for flock is used only five times in the New Testament, and this verse has the only two occurrences that Paul wrote. But it's also used in Luke 2, which records the story of the birth of Jesus. Verse 8 says that when Jesus was born, there were shepherds "staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock." Then an angel appeared to them and told them about the birth of Jesus so that they could go and see him.

So that verse is using the word "flock" literally, just like Paul did in 1 Corinthians 9:7. But Paul's focus wasn't really on the flock. Instead he was focused on the milk from the flock. The Greek word for milk is used only five times in the New Testament. It's found twice in Paul's letters, and both of them are here in 1 Corinthians. The first one was back in chapter 3 and verse 2. There Paul said, "I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, since you were not yet ready for it." So in that verse Paul was using the word "milk" figuratively to refer to basic Christian instruction. When he was in Corinth, he was only able to cover the basics, because the Corinthian believers were like babies who weren't mature enough to handle solid food.

But in chapter 9 and verse 7 Paul was using the word "milk" literally, and he referred to drinking milk. But the Greek word for drink is actually the same one that was translated "eat" earlier in the verse. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have footnotes to help us see this fact. The Greeks were a little more flexible with this word than we are with our word "eat." But the Legacy Standard Bible is wrong to put the word "of" right after the word "eat." In the original Greek there is no preposition

after the first Greek verb for eat. But there is a preposition after the second occurrence of the Greek verb for eat, and it's normally translated with the word "from." The Christian Standard Bible has the word "from," but it's in the wrong place. It should be before the word "milk" and not after it.

But the point of this preposition is just that the shepherd would drink some of the milk and not all of it. The English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible both have the word "some," and that's a good interpretation. A shepherd would normally sell a lot of the milk to make money, but it was expected that he would drink some of it for himself. So the obvious answer to this third and final rhetorical question is "no one," just like we had with the first two questions. All three of these questions powerfully prove from everyday life that Paul had the right to receive financial support for his ministry as an apostle. And I love how he ended this verse by talking about shepherding, because that's such a wonderful picture of what Christian leaders do in the church.

But it's important to note that all three of these illustrations are referring to relatively lowly people in society. None of these people would have gotten rich through their occupations. Paul wasn't trying to argue that he should have gotten rich from his ministry as an apostle. He was just trying to say that he had the right to have his basic needs met. And that's a good example for Christian leaders today. There are too many so-called pastors who have huge salaries and lots of nice possessions. That shouldn't be happening! No one in full-time Christian ministry should have a luxurious lifestyle. No pastor should demand a large salary; instead he should be willing to live in relative poverty for the good of the church. Whether we're in full-time ministry or not, our focus should be on serving others instead of enriching ourselves. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help in this area.