

Lent Devotional March 19, 2020

Scripture

1 Corinthians 9:1-15

1 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? 2 If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. 3 This is my defense to those who would examine me. 4 Do we not have the right to our food and drink? 5 Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? 6 Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? 7 Who at any time pays the expenses for doing military service? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk? 8 Do I say this on human authority? Does not the law also say the same? 9 For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? 10 Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake, for whoever plows should plow in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop. 11 If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? 12 If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we still more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. 13 Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed on the altar? 14 In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. 15 But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case. Indeed, I would rather die than that—no one will deprive me of my ground for boasting!

Devotional

The Rev. Dr. Edward Newberry '71, Pastoral Ministry (2012)

Today's passage of 15 verses contains 17 questions asked by Paul to the Corinthians. Each question is different and somewhat rhetorical, but all relate to his work as an apostle. Reflecting other assertions of authority, such as "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God," and Paul's comment in verse 3, "this is my defense," the passage could be seen as another effort by Paul to declare that he is a real apostle. The powerful authority claimed here is rooted in the notion of freedom, framed by the opening question: "Am I not free?" It sounds like Paul's commission by the risen Christ has established his freedom to do as he pleases when enacting his apostolic ministry.

Today's passage is part of a larger section of the letter—a section dealing with Christian freedom, especially in the matter of eating meat offered to idols. Assuring Christians of sound knowledge that "food will not bring us close to God," Paul is using himself and his exercise of freedom as an example, as strong Christians relate to weaker believers who are worried and wrestling with this dilemma.

In the modern West of 2020, we individual Christians are not defending our "apostleship" or worrying about idol-tainted food. So what does this passage say to our reflections and spiritual disciplines during Lent? An interpretation contrary to the traditional understanding of Paul's purpose here might help: says one commentary, Paul is not defending his right to be an apostle, but explaining why he has not *exercised his rights* as an apostle, namely, he doesn't want to be a stumbling block, a hindrance to the gospel of Jesus Christ. For Christians who revere the gospel, that sounds like a worthy goal for Lent—or any time—as we live out our faith.

As individuals who are joined with others in the body of Christ, we might look to Paul's convictions as an apostle of Christ for guidance regarding our witness in Christian life together. In explaining the marks of the Church, the PC(USA) *Book of Order* speaks of the apostolicity of the Church as God's gift in Jesus Christ. Our calling and mission as those sent by Christ is to proclaim the gospel of God's love, grace, truth, freedom, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and salvation in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, for the whole world.

We could follow Paul's example of sacrificial freedom in our witness of word and deed. We could strive not to hinder but rather to further the proclamation and living of this good news. Our faithfulness as Christ's body, the Church, will determine the outcome.

Prayer

Holy God, your eternal love sent Jesus Christ to our world. The Lordship of Jesus sends us into our world. Both of these commissions are signs of apostolic responsibility. Help us to know the blessing of being the Church, which is charged with continuing the mission and message of the Savior. We seek to proclaim Jesus and his truth as good news. Empower consistent and sincere faithfulness in our ministries. May all we do as your Church bless our world and glorify our gracious Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.