

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Chapter 9

Paul Surrenders His Rights

9 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? 2 If to others I am not an apostle, 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 eat and drink? 5 Do we not have the right to take along 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 serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? 8 Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? 9 For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? 10 Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. 11 If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? 12 If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even 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 the sacrificial offerings? 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 these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting. 16 For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! 17 For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. 18 What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. 19 For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. 24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. 25 Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. 27 But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

At first glance, chapter 9 may seem to interrupt the flow of Paul's discussion of idol-meat, which was the topic of chapter 8 and to which he will return in 10:14–11:1. Some have suggested that this discourse on his apostleship is a digression or an insertion from another letter. But closer study shows that the passage is integrally linked to the preceding argument. Paul has been chiding the believers who were puffed up with their knowledge (8:1) for their blithe disregard of the brother with a weak conscience (8:7–12). As we have seen, he concluded by changing the focus from the Corinthians ("you are sinning," 8:12) to himself, saying in essence: "If I saw that food was offending my brother, I would give up meat for good" (8:13). (CC)

In the face of the Corinthians' misunderstanding of his motives, it is not surprising that Paul begins this new section of his argument with a series of sixteen rhetorical questions in the first fourteen verses. (CC)

9:1 *Am I not free?* Do I not have the rights that any Christian has? (CSB)

At the outset, Paul asks four questions in rapid succession, all expecting the answer yes. The first asserts his Christian freedom: "Am I not free?" (9:1). The word "free" (ἐλευθερός) was not used in the previous chapter, but it was implied especially by the reference to the self-confident Christians claiming their "authority, right" (ἐξουσία, 8:9) to partake of meat sacrificed to idols. Paul is saying: "I am not inferior to you. I share your knowledge that idols and idol-meat are nothing. Like you, my conscience allows me to eat all foods. I too am free in the Gospel." (CC)

Am I not an apostle? Some at Corinth (2Co 12:11–12) and elsewhere (Gal 1:1; 1:15–2:10) questioned Paul's genuine apostleship. To certify his apostleship Paul gives this proof: that he has seen the Lord Jesus (Ac 9:1–9; 22:6–16; 26:12–18), as was true of the other apostles (Ac 1:21–22). Furthermore, he adds that his ministry has produced true spiritual fruit (the Corinthians) for the Lord, which should confirm to them that he is indeed an apostle. (CSB)

In Christ, no man-made laws apply (Gal 5:1). (TLSB)

Chapter 9, then, elaborates Paul's attitude as an apostle. He practices what he preaches. He is willing to give up his apostolic privileges, doing whatever it takes to win others to the Gospel. Of course, he has the right to eat and drink, to be married, and to receive support from the Corinthian congregation (9:4–7). But apparently his refusal to accept support struck the Corinthians as being particularly strange, accustomed as they were to their own philosophers and sophists, who thought it beneath their dignity to work with their hands. They were used to people in privileged positions exploiting their opportunities with no consideration for others. By renouncing his privileges, Paul is emphasizing that salvation is a free gift of God (Eph 2:8–9). (CC)

"Indeed," he continues, "I possess even greater privileges. Am I not an apostle? Don't I possess all the knowledge and authority of an apostle and teacher of the church? And didn't I see Jesus our Lord with my own eyes on the Damascus road?" (cf. 1 Jn 1:1). Here Paul reminds them of the dramatic encounter which had transformed the persecutor into an apostle (Acts 9; 22; 26). Although he had not been associated with Jesus during his earthly ministry, ever since that day on the road to Damascus Paul possessed an apostle's most important qualification: he was "an eye-witness of his [Jesus'] resurrection" (Acts 1:22). Jesus had appeared to him "last of all, as to one prematurely born" (1 Cor 15:8). Paul never ceased to be amazed by the privilege so undeservedly bestowed on him. As he put it, the Lord appeared "even ... to me" (15:8). (CC)

apostle? It would seem an apostle would have more "rights" than others, but Paul later emphasizes that even an apostle surrenders his rights for the sake of others. (TLSB)

seen Jesus. Cf Ac 9; 1Co 15:3–11; Gal 1:12. (TLSB)

my workmanship. The Corinthians know Christ because Paul preached the Gospel to them, thereby giving him authority to rebuke their actions. Cf 4:14–21. (TLSB)

With the fourth question (“Are you not my handiwork in the Lord?” 9:1), Paul reminds them that they owed him their very existence as Christians. It was from his hand that they had received their freedom from the shackles of idolatry. He was their father in Christ (4:15). For a year and six months he had labored among them, and the Lord had blessed his planting of the Word (3:5–7; see also Acts 18:11). Now this congregation was a tribute to his skillful handiwork as master-builder in Corinth (1 Cor 3:10). The Corinthians were his pride and joy, his letter of recommendation (2 Cor 3:1–3; cf. 1 Thess 2:19–20). (CC)

Cephas, James, and John had concentrated on preaching to the Jews (Gal 2:9). Other apostles were laying the church’s foundation (1 Cor 3:11) in other areas, and Paul had no wish to encroach on their territory (Rom 15:20–21). Paul recognizes that Christians in these regions owed allegiance to their own fathers in the faith rather than to himself. But it was otherwise in Corinth. He declares, “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” (1 Cor 9:2). It could not be denied that Paul had a special relationship to the Corinthian church. Indeed, the existence of that vibrant church was an outstanding recommendation of his apostolic ministry; it was a “letter ... known and read by all people” (2 Cor 3:2; cf. Acts 18:7–11). Anyone who doubted the validity of his call need only look at the Corinthian church. (CC)

9:2-3 *those.* The people at Corinth who questioned Paul’s authority (4:1–5; 2Co 10–12). (TLSB)

seal. Proof that the Gospel preached by Paul is the true Gospel, hence proving his apostleship. (TLSB)

9:4-6 Paul will now invoke four authorities to confirm his right to receive a living wage as compensation for his work as an apostle. The first is the conduct of the other apostles. Although it was obvious that the Lord had blessed Paul’s ministry in Corinth, some of the factious members were questioning whether he was a genuine apostle. They argued that he had refused financial support because he knew he could not receive such support with a good conscience; he knew he had no apostolic “authority” or “right” (ἐξουσία, 9:4–6, 12, 18) to it. It has been suggested that it was particularly the wealthier members of the church who had been hurt by his refusal of support and were now lobbying against him. Against such critics he now defends himself. (CC)

9:4 *right to food and drink.* Paul and Barnabas, as God’s workers, have a right to have their food and other physical needs supplied at the church’s expense (cf. vv. 6, 13–14). (CSB)

To receive daily sustenance so Paul could commit fully to service in the congregation. (TLSB)

9:5 *take along a believing wife.* Paul asserts his right to be married, if he wishes. This does not mean that he was married, as some have imagined (see 7:7). Other apostles, including Peter (see Mk 1:30), had wives. (CSB)

On missionary trips, wives of apostles would also be supported by the congregations. Some apostles were married (e.g., Simon Peter; cf Mk 1:29–31). (TLSB)

A closely related question follows in 9:5. Does the missionary not also have the right to take a Christian woman (a “sister”) along with him as his wife, and count on the church to maintain her as well? The Corinthians were aware that this was the general practice of the other apostles. The Lord’s half brothers, James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas (Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3) were also in the habit of taking their wives along on their journeys for the Gospel (1 Cor 9:5). Finally, Paul mentions Cephas, the leader of the eleven original apostles (9:5). That Peter was a married man is well known from the gospel story of Jesus healing Peter’s mother-in-law (Mt 8:14–15; Mk 1:29–31; Lk 4:38–39). This reference to Peter’s married status, as if everyone in Corinth was familiar with it, has led many to think Peter must have visited Corinth. However, it is not necessary to assume this; the lives and activities of the apostles were of general interest to all Christians and would have been familiar to many who had never met them. (CC)

brothers of the Lord. Mk 6:3 names James, Joses, Judas, and Simon. James was later considered an apostle (Gal 1:19). (TLSB)

Cephas? Peter. (TLSB)

9:6 Barnabas. He and Paul had a disagreement (Ac 15:36–41) prior to reaching Corinth (Ac 18), but Barnabas likely also worked at a trade while he evangelized (Ac 13–14). (TLSB)

refrain from working. Although congregations were scripturally obligated to support the missionaries who worked among them (cf v 9), Paul and Barnabas did not accept money from the Corinthians. (TLSB)

Paul is emphatic (9:4) that he and his coworkers (men like Barnabas, 9:6, and Timothy, 4:17) had every right to expect financial support from the Corinthians. As he will argue at length (9:4–14), the laborer is worthy of his hire (Lk 10:7; 1 Cor 9:14). Some Christians in Corinth had asserted their right (ἐξουσία) to eat idol-meat in all kinds of situations (8:9–10). Paul responds: “We have rights, too, and totally legitimate rights. But (as he will argue later) we have renounced our rights for the sake of the Gospel and the brother.” In view of the use of ἐξουσία (“right, authority”) in connection with the Corinthians who wanted to eat idol-meat (8:9), some have argued that in 9:4 Paul must likewise be asserting the church workers’ right to eat such meat. However, the additional words “and drink” in 9:4 suggest that he has moved beyond any direct discussion of idol-food and is now addressing the minister’s right to sustenance. Besides, it is evident in 8:10–13 that Paul would never have argued for his or anyone else’s right to recline in an idol temple. (CC)

The Corinthians were also aware that most of the apostles devoted themselves to their ministry full-time. Paul, Barnabas, and their companions stood out as exceptions. On his arrival in Corinth, Paul had stayed with Aquila and Priscilla “because they were of the same trade ... and he [Paul] was working, for by trade they were tentmakers” (Acts 18:2–3). Although Barnabas and Paul had gone their separate ways since the end of the first missionary journey, it seems Barnabas had continued the habit of supporting himself, and this was well known to the Corinthians. As Greek intellectuals tended to despise manual labor, some members of the congregation may have been embarrassed that their leader and teacher demeaned himself in this manner. Paul’s argument here follows a similar pattern to 2 Thess 3:8–9, where he counters a tendency to idleness: “We did not eat anyone’s bread for free, but with toil and labor we were working night and day, so that we would not burden any of you. It is not because we do not have the right [ἐξουσίαν], but to give ourselves to you as an example to imitate.” But while “tentmaking ministry” was his practice in Corinth, Paul insisted on his right to full support from the church. (CC)

9:7–10 Paul uses both human examples (v 7) and scriptural authority (vv 8–9) to demonstrate the missionaries’ right to be financially supported by the congregations. Shepherds in the field subsisted almost solely on the flock’s milk because they could not leave them to search for other resources. (TLSB)

9:7 By means of three rhetorical questions in 9:7, each beginning with the word τίς (“who?”), Paul argues from common custom that everyone considers to be only right and fair. In everyday life it is considered proper that the laborer should receive sustenance on the basis of what his labor produces. Paul supplies examples from the life of a soldier, a vine grower, and a shepherd. It is noteworthy that Scripture often pictures God’s people as an army, a vineyard, and a flock. In 2 Tim 2:4–6 Paul uses a similar triad of analogies from everyday life (the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer) in encouraging Timothy to be a disciplined pastor. (CC)

9:8 *the Law.* Paul now asks (9:8) whether his use of human analogies in 9:7 suggests he is speaking from a merely human perspective. This rhetorical question expects the answer “of course not!” Rather, his line of argument has the support of divine Law as laid down in the OT. (CC)

9:9 *You shall not muzzle an ox.* Paul applies Dt 25:4 (“written for our sake,” v 10) to church workers (cf 1Tm 5:8). (TLSB)

Paul explains himself by pointing to the passage in the Pentateuch (“the Law of Moses,” 9:9) where he finds the principle that the church worker should be maintained by the church. The passage is found in the fifth book of Moses, in Deut 25:4: “You shall not muzzle the ox while it is threshing the grain.” Israel’s farmers used oxen to pull a threshing sledge around a threshing floor until the kernels of grain were separated from the husks. The Mosaic Law prescribes that while the ox is busy threshing it should be permitted to eat some of the grain. This text is embedded in a context which inculcates fair treatment of one’s fellow human beings, whether it be the poor neighbor, the poor and needy laborer, the alien, the orphan, the widow, or the condemned man (Deut 24:10–25:3). The God who cares even for the sparrow is laying down “the principle that all workers have a right to be paid for their services (be they animal or human).” (CC)

The verb ἐγγράφη (“it was written”) in 1 Cor 9:10 harks back again to the quotation of Deut 25:4 in 1 Cor 9:9. Of course the Deuteronomy text was written for us, Paul continues, “because the plowman should plow in hope, and the man who threshes should do so in hope of a share in the crop” (9:10). The phrase “in hope” is in an emphatic position at the beginning of the first clause; it is then repeated in the clause about the one who threshes. The worker should live in confident expectation that his labors will be rewarded. Paul will use Deut 25:4 again in 1 Timothy to undergird his insistence that pastors must be properly paid: “Let the elders who lead well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in word and doctrine; for the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it is threshing,’ and, ‘The laborer is worthy of his pay’ ” (1 Tim 5:17–18). (CC)

9:10 *written for our sake.* In this ancient text from the Mosaic Law, Paul maintains, God is speaking “*entirely for our sake*” (1 Cor 9:10). For the sake of *us* apostles, so he argues, and for the sake of all who assist us in sowing spiritual things among you (9:11), this text was written, in order to assure us that the church is obliged to support her ministers. (CC)

Paul’s insistence that God is speaking “entirely” for our sake (9:10), coupled with his denial that God is concerned for oxen (9:9), may be best understood as a Semitic manner of speech, where the lesser of two good things is regarded as subordinate and is denied altogether, as in Hos 6:6,

where God says, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” and Ezek 20:25, “I myself gave them statutes which were not good.” (CC)

Many biblical passages reaffirm the Creator’s compassionate concern for all his creatures. The rabbis took a great interest in Deut 25:4, interpreting it as an example of an argument from lesser to greater: “If God cares for oxen, how much more will he care for us!” We may compare Jesus’ argument in Lk 12:6–7: “Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God. ... Do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows.” Thus Paul draws out the primary application of the Mosaic words. They apply even more to human beings than they do to oxen. (CC)

9:11 In 1 Cor 9:11 Paul continues with imagery from agriculture, but now it is not plowing and threshing but sowing. As the plowman and the thresher live in hope of a share in the harvest, so those who sow the seed may rightly anticipate their share in the crop. Back in 3:6 he said that he had “planted” (ἐφύτευσα) the Corinthian church, and Apollos had “watered” it, though it was God who gave the growth. Under the plural “we sowed” in 9:11 Paul is probably including Silas and Timothy, who worked alongside him in Corinth (Acts 18:5). The if-clause is a condition of fact: Paul, Silas, and Timothy did in fact sow spiritual things (τὰ πνευματικά, 1 Cor 9:11) for the Corinthians’ benefit. So it would not be extraordinary if they expected some material rewards (τὰ σαρκικά) in return; indeed, such compensation was *owed* to them. Paul presents a similar argument in Rom 15:27 to persuade his Gentile converts to support the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem: “If the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings [τοῖς πνευματικοῖς], they ought [ὀφείλουσιν] also to be of service to them in material things [τοῖς σαρκικοῖς]” (cf. also Gal 6:6). (CC)

sown spiritual things. Preaching of the Gospel (cf 3:5–7). (TLSB)

reap material. Food, lodging and pay supplied by the Corinthians (cf. Gal 6:6). Paul here sets forth the principle that Christian workers should be paid for their labors. (CSB)

Support for the work of preaching the Gospel (vv 7–10). (TLSB)

9:12 *others.* Perhaps Peter or Apollos (3:5–9, 22). (TLSB)

Other sowers of the seed in Corinth had exercised their right to receive support from the believers (1 Cor 9:12). Presumably Paul means Apollos and possibly Peter as well. Most likely it was the contrast between their willingness to accept support and the refusal by Paul, Silas, and Timothy to follow suit that led some in Corinth to surmise that Paul and his colleagues felt they had no right to it. However, Paul continues, the very opposite was the case. As the founders of the church, Silas, Timothy, and he himself had an even greater right to support than Apollos and Peter. But, as Paul begins to explain, he and his fellow workers had not taken advantage of this right (see 9:15–18 for a fuller explanation). They were willing to put up with the hardship of “working two jobs”—working with their hands while making the most of every opportunity to preach the Gospel. This had been their normal practice ever since they began the mission in Thessalonica (1 Thess 2:9–10; 2 Thess 3:8). (CC)

share this rightful claim. The point of Paul’s discussion in ch. 9. He had numerous rights that he did not claim because of his love for the Corinthians. Thus ch. 9 is an extended personal illustration of the practice advocated in ch. 8. Because of love for others, believers should be ready to surrender their rights. (CSB)

Paul's unique example of not accepting support shows that "rights" must be put aside when the faith of others may be shaken. (TLSB)

9:13 *those who employed in the temple.* The Corinthian believers would understand this illustration not only from their knowledge of the OT (cf. Lev 7:28–36; Nu 18:8–20) but also from the practice in pagan temples in Greece and Rome. (CSB)

General reference to any religious service, whether Jewish or Greco-Roman. (TLSB)

9:14 This naturally concludes the argument of vv 8–13, but with additional reference to Jesus' teaching in Lk 10:7. The teaching applies both to the missionaries of the apostolic period and to present-day servants of the Gospel. (TLSB)

Paul has appealed to apostolic practice (9:4–6), to custom (9:7), and to the OT Law (9:8–13). The final piece of evidence which clinches the argument is a word from the Lord Jesus himself. Paul phrases Christ's command as a general principle: "Those who preach the Gospel [are] to live from the Gospel" (9:14). This principle may be gleaned from a number of passages in the gospels, especially from the practice of Jesus himself during the three years of his public ministry. (CC)

living. The resources necessary to allow servants of the Gospel to dedicate themselves fully to their work. (TLSB)

One statement of Christ that supports the principle Paul asserts is this: "The laborer is worthy of his wages" (Lk 10:7). Matthew's gospel also records this command (Mt 10:10). Originally this was spoken in the context of Jesus sending out the seventy-two with the command that they stay as guests in the houses of their receptive hearers, "eating and drinking whatever they give you" (Lk 10:7). Paul saw this command as having general application to all ministers of the Gospel: their claim to the church's support has the backing of a dominical decree. It is significant that this word of Jesus was directed to the full company of the seventy-two, not just the twelve apostles. Therefore, it has a wider application to all kinds of ministers of the Gospel in the church today. (CC)

9:15 Paul uses himself as a positive example of not using his rights so that no one can accuse him of preaching the Gospel for his own benefit and thereby discrediting the Gospel. (TLSB)

for boasting. That he had preached the gospel without charge, so that they could not say that they had paid him for it. (CSB)

9:16 *I preach the gospel.* The Lord had laid on Paul the necessity of preaching the gospel (Ac 9:1–16; 26:16–18; see also Jer 20:9 and note). (CSB)

ἐὰν μὴ εὐαγγελίσωμαι—This aorist subjunctive verb contrasts with the present subjunctive εὐαγγελίζωμαι in the first clause of 9:16. It has been suggested that the aorist implies this: "if I were once not to preach." However, that addition of "once" is reading too much into the colorless aorist tense, which is the usual tense with the subjunctive mood. (CC)

Paul could not boast of his activity as a Gospel preacher, for he was under compulsion (1 Cor 9:16). That could be traced back to his divine call to be an apostle of Jesus Christ with a special commission to the Gentiles. His preaching of the Gospel, then, was simply discharging the debt that had been laid on him (Rom 1:14). As one commentator has explained, there are two ways of incurring a debt. The first is when we borrow money from someone; the second is when someone

entrusts us with money that he asks us to hand on to someone else. Until we actually hand it on, we stand indebted to the person for whom it is intended. Paul's debt was of this second kind. He had been entrusted with the Gospel and was obligated to preach it to others. If he failed to discharge that debt, then "woe" (1 Cor 9:16) to him; he would have to face God's wrath. The burden incumbent on him to preach the Gospel is reminiscent of Jeremiah, for whom the word of the Lord "became in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I grew weary of trying to contain it, and I am not able" (Jer 20:9). (CC)

Paul can claim no credit for his preaching; he is under orders to do it. God told Ananias before he baptized Paul, "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15). (PBC)

no ground for boasting ... necessity. Paul did not choose to become a preacher of the Gospel; Christ called him directly (Gal 1:15–16; Ac 9:15–16). The glory for Paul's work belongs to Christ alone. (TLSB)

9:17 *ido this of my own will – ἐκὼν ... ἄκων*—Paul may have selected these words for their paronomasia. ἐκὼν means "willing(ly), glad(ly)" (BAGD; cf. Rom 8:20), while the antonym ἄκων means "unwilling" (and is here to be translated as an adverb, BAGD). Because of the context, in which Paul refers to compulsion and reward, the best translations for these words here are "voluntarily" and "involuntarily." (CC)

Just as there are two ways of incurring a debt, so there are also two ways in which a person can carry out a task: either as a free person or as an involuntary conscript. If a person is free and does the work voluntarily, then he is entitled to a reward. But this is not the case with Paul. The first sentence in 1 Cor 9:17 merely sets up the contrast with 9:17b, which does apply to Paul: "but if [I do it] involuntarily, I am entrusted with a stewardship." Paul understood himself as a slave of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:1; Gal 1:10; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:1). He had no choice but to preach the Gospel. He was a "steward" entrusted with "the mysteries of God," and he was expected to carry out his commission faithfully (1 Cor 4:1–2; see also Eph 3:2). (CC)

entrusted with a stewardship. Called by God to preach Christ (Gal 1:11–12). (TLSB)

He cannot expect a citation simply for having done his duty. Like a steward he was simply carrying out his responsibility. (PBC)

9:18 *my reward...present the gospel.* Paul's reward in preaching is not material things but the boasting that he has preached to the Corinthians without charge and has not taken advantage of the rights he deserves: food and drink, shelter and pay (vv. 3–12). (CSB)

That Christ would be preached with no tangible benefit to Paul. No one could reject the Gospel as something Paul had created for his own benefit. (TLSB)

free of charge – Paul wanted to show how grateful he was for what had made of him. He needed to do something voluntarily, beyond the call of duty, to show such gratitude. By sacrificing his salary, to which he had every right, Paul was doing something of his own free will to show his love for his Lord. (PBC)

Make full use of. καταχρήσασθαι—It is a verb in 7:31, its only other NT occurrence. Here the verb could have the nuance "to use fully, make full use of," or, as in 7:31, it could mean "exploit, abuse," which seems most appropriate in this context. (CC)

Although Paul saw himself as a man under compulsion and therefore unable to expect any reward for his services, he nonetheless found enormous satisfaction in presenting the free Gospel free of charge (1 Cor 9:18). That was sufficient reward for him. Under those circumstances, he did not need to exploit his rights in the Gospel. Consequently no one could impugn the purity of his motives; his selflessness was incontestable. Obviously he was not just another religious peddler, but a man of sincerity (2 Cor 2:17). (CC)

Our contemporary application of Paul's argument in 1 Cor 9:1–18 needs to be well balanced. There are two messages here, one for the church, the other for the minister. On the one hand, the principle that “the laborer is worthy of his wages” (Lk 10:7) certainly applies today. Churches must realize that ministers of the Gospel are entitled to their salary and benefits. The church benefits greatly when its ministers are sufficiently compensated so that they may devote themselves single-mindedly to the Gospel, free of worldly cares. Also, Paul freely chose not to accept what was owed him. The church did not pressure him to forego compensation; in fact, the pressure from the church seems to have been for him to accept pay. (CC)

On the other hand, as one commentator warns, “the objective of this text” should not be “lost in concerns over ‘rights’ that reflect bald professionalism rather than a concern for the gospel itself.” No “hindrance” (1 Cor 9:12) should be put in the way of the Gospel. There may be circumstances today, also, when the church servant will decide to forgo some of his rights. Indeed, for the Gospel's sake—when the situation has called for it—many of God's servants have worked for minimal pay or even supported themselves from their own resources. The minister is given the model of Paul's selfless and sacrificial labor free of charge, which in turn imitates the ministry of Christ himself. (CC)

Paul has been defending his high calling and special standing in the church as a free apostle of the Lord Jesus (9:1–18). By maintaining his financial independence (9:15–18), he has made sure he is beholden to no one but his Lord. No one could manipulate him on the basis of favors rendered or owed. (CC)

Thus in not seeking favors or financial privileges, even those he had a “right” to expect (9:4–6, 18), Paul had shown in every way the mind-set of a servant, in response to Jesus' challenge: “Whoever among you wishes to be great should be your servant, and whoever among you wishes to be first should be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:26–28). Paul and his colleagues saw themselves as the Corinthians' slaves for Jesus' sake (2 Cor 4:5). Theirs was a ministry of service. By this humble approach, Paul aimed to win as many as possible for the Gospel. To be sure, the church would never be more than a minority in the community (“some,” 1 Cor 9:22). But Paul had been assured that the Lord had “many people” in the city (Acts 18:10), and the apostle's ministry was designed to make good on that assurance by winning all he could for Christ. (CC)

Paul now gives four illustrations of how he had adapted his mission strategy to win different groups: (1) the Jews (9:20a); (2) those under Law (9:20b); (3) those without Law (9:21); (4) the weak (9:22). (CC)

His first concern was for his Jewish kinsmen. Although his calling was to be the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 11:13; cf. 1 Tim 2:7), Paul still saw himself as under obligation to “the Jew first” (Rom 1:16). To the Jews belonged “the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the promises, and the patriarchs . . . and from them according to the flesh [came] the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever” (Rom 9:4–5). With their background as God's chosen people,

they should have had an affinity for Christianity. After all, the faith Paul preached was the fulfillment of Israel’s ancient hope (Acts 26:6–7; 28:20). The Jews, then, were natural branches unnaturally cut off from their own olive tree because of their unbelief; God’s desire is to graft them back in again (Rom 11:17–24). It was a constant source of sorrow to Paul that most of them had rejected the Gospel. He even wished he could be accursed if that would bring about their salvation (Rom 9:1–3). That they might find salvation was the constant burden of his prayers (Rom 10:1) and a high priority in his ministry. (CC)

Thus it was his policy in each town to begin his ministry in the synagogue, appealing to the Jews first, and then to the Gentile God-fearers present at synagogue worship. In fact, he did not hesitate to magnify his mission to Gentiles before Jewish audiences, in order to provoke his kinsmen to jealousy and thus save *some* of them (Rom 11:14). (CC)

9:19–23 Highlights Paul’s complete focus on the needs of the people to whom he was preaching. (TLSB)

9:19 *I make myself a servant to everyone.* Not only did Paul not use his right to material support in preaching the gospel but he also deprived himself—curtailed his personal privileges and social and religious rights—in dealing with different kinds of people. (CSB)

Being. ὧν—The participle, which recurs in 9:20–21, is concessive, hence “*although* I am.” (CC)

Paul was willing to give up his own habits, preferences, and rights so that nothing would keep people from responding to his preaching of the Gospel. “The community of God in every place and every time has, according to its circumstances, the good right, power, and authority to change and decrease or increase ceremonies <that are truly adiaphora>. They should do this thoughtfully and without giving offense, in an orderly and appropriate way, whenever it is considered most profitable, most beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, and the Church’s edification. Furthermore, we can yield and give in with a good conscience to the weak in faith in such outward adiaphora” (FC SD X 9). Luther: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all” (AE 31:344). The Gospel not only frees us from sin but also frees us for service. Every aspect of our lives (v 22) is to be adapted to the needs of others so that they might come to faith in Christ. Paul is not advocating changing the Gospel message to suit the hearers. There is only one name given under heaven by which we must be saved (1:18–31; Ac 4:12). However, the changeless Gospel empowers us to sacrifice our own rights, tastes, interests, and preferences so that others might hear the message of Christ in all its power. (TLSB)

to win. To bring to Christ. (CSB)

τοὺς πλείονας—Normally this comparative of πολὺς means “the majority, most” (10:5; cf. BAGD, s.v. πολὺς, II 2 a α). However, in this context it means “more”—more than Paul could have gained by another approach. (CC)

ἵνα ... κερδήσω—κερδαίνω (“to win; to gain, make a profit”) and κέρδος (“a gain”) are expressions from the world of commerce. Paul had once considered all his achievements as a Pharisee to be κέρδη, “gains,” but after coming to know Christ he dismissed them as ζημία, “loss” (Phil 3:7–8). The expression “to gain [κερδαίνω] one’s brother” for Christ was used earlier by Jesus (Mt 18:15; 16:26). Compare a similar usage in 1 Pet 3:1. The NT also uses words for “profit” (κερδαίνω, κέρδος) and “loss” (ζημιώω, ζημία) to describe gaining Christ as the gaining

of a great treasure. Fee points out that Paul’s use of κερδαίνω in 1 Cor 9:19–22 is probably a play on the μισθός (“reward”) metaphor in 9:17–18. (CC)

After stating that by not accepting a salary he is free from any obligation to those who provide such support, Paul tells us his purpose in relinquishing his rights go far beyond gaining satisfaction in his ministry. His higher purpose is to save souls. (PBC)

9:20 *Jews*. Though himself Jewish, Paul refers specifically to religious behaviors through which the Jews defined their relationship to God. Paul had already abandoned such rites as circumcision (7:19), food laws (8:8), and the observance of certain days (Col 2:16). However, to prevent people from dismissing his preaching of the Gospel, Paul did on occasion “practice” some of these (e.g., his circumcision of Timothy “because of the Jews” in Ac 16:3). (TLSB)

τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις—The definite article before the noun indicates “those [Jews] with whom I had to deal on each occasion.” (CC)

those under the law. Those under the OT law and religious practices (the Jews). (CSB)

Repeated for emphasis, showing that observance of “the Law” (as understood by Judaism) was of no value before God. (TLSB)

I became like one under the law. For the Jews’ sake Paul conformed to the Jewish law (Ac 16:3; 18:18; 21:20–26). (CSB)

Paul willingly submitted to the Law so that the Gospel might be heard. (TLSB)

To win the Jews, Paul knew he must become “as a Jew” (1 Cor 9:20). Accordingly he was careful never to cause them unnecessary offense. He had Timothy circumcised “because of the Jews in those areas” (Acts 16:3). He also joined four Jewish men in the temple who were under a vow, purifying himself with them and paying their expenses (Acts 21:20–26). (CC)

The second part of 1 Cor 9:20, where Paul speaks of his eagerness to win “those under Law,” is probably an expansion of 9:20a to include not only the Jews but also the numerous Gentile God-fearers who loved the Jewish people, attended synagogue, and willingly subjected themselves to many aspects of Jewish law. These people were attracted to Christianity in great numbers. Although Paul had turned his back on a punctilious observance of the OT ceremonial law and no longer saw himself as “under Law” but as “under grace” (Rom 6:14), he did not make an arrogant display of his new freedom but reached out to God-fearers in a sympathetic way, humbly identifying himself with them in order to win them for the Gospel. (CC)

9:21 Likewise Paul had become “to those without Law like someone without Law” (1 Cor 9:21). Gentile converts, he insisted, had no need to practice circumcision and observe the Jewish food laws, festivals, and Sabbath regulations (Col 2:16). Timothy had been circumcised because he had a Jewish mother and therefore was regarded as legally Jewish. Consequently, not to have circumcised him would have destroyed Timothy’s credibility as a witness to Jews. On the other hand, the apostle was adamant that Titus, whose parents were both Gentile, must not be circumcised (Gal 2:3). As long as Gentiles believed the Gospel and were baptized, Paul was satisfied. After all, what mattered was not ceremonies but “faith active in love” (Gal 5:6). (CC)

When Paul calls the Gentiles “those without Law” and says that he too became as one “without Law” (1 Cor 9:21), he is not condoning immoral behavior. In 1 Corinthians 5, for example, Paul

stated in the strongest terms that Gentile Christians must conform to God's moral Law, and that was also affirmed by the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:20, 29). The expression in 1 Cor 9:21 refers to the Gentiles' status as people who lacked the Mosaic Law. To be sure, Gentiles had some sense for the requirements of natural law; "the work of the law" was written on their hearts (Rom 2:15). But the Jews had an advantage in that the divine law had been spelled out for them in a written code. They had been entrusted with the oracles of God (Rom 3:2). (CC)

Lest his readers get the impression that Paul does not care about God's Law, he adds the qualification that he is "not without God's Law but obedient to the law of Christ" (1 Cor 9:21). By this he means he is subject to the law of love, the pattern of self-sacrificing love which Jesus had inculcated and exemplified by his death on the cross.¹⁴ Paul bears the burdens of others and thus fulfills "the law of Christ" (1 Cor 9:21), the "royal law" (Gal 6:2; James 2:8). In his outreach to Jews, God-fearers, Gentiles, and the weak, this royal law governs everything Paul does. (CC)

I became as one under the law – When Paul became a Christian, he became a free man in Christ, free from all the laws and regulations that bound God's people in the OT. But to win the Jews he lived like the Jews "under the law," the ceremonial law, though as a NT Christian he was no longer obligated to do so. He kept the Sabbath and festival days; he followed OT regulations regarding eating pork and shellfish; he observed the rite of circumcision. In all this, however, he did not compromise his faith in Christ. (PBC)

as one outside the law. Those who have not been raised under the OT law (the Gentiles). (CSB)

ἄνομος ... ἔννομος—ὁ ἄνομος and οἱ ἄνομοι, literally, "the lawless," were common Jewish designations for the Gentiles. The fact that Paul calls them "lawless, without the Law" indicates that νόμος in 9:20–21 refers to the OT, the Torah in particular. Gentiles do have natural law, the testimony in creation and the human conscience, which functions as a kind of law, though imperfect because of human sin (Rom 1:19–21; 2:12–16). But they lack the revealed Word of God. Gutbrod comments: "It is hard to distinguish between a mere affirmation that they do not have the Law and a judgment that they are sinners." The latter view is evident in, for example, Psalms of Solomon 17:11, 18; Mt 15:28; Lk 22:37. Paul will write to the Romans, "As many as sinned without [knowing] the Law [ἄνόμως], they will also perish without the Law [ἄνόμως]" (Rom 2:12). There is no hope for salvation apart from God's Word. In 1 Cor 9:21 Paul is simply referring to those who "do not actually know the Law and are not aware" that they are violating it. (CC)

The opposite of ἄνομος is ἔννομος, used in Acts 19:39 of "a lawful assembly" (ἐννόμῳ ἐκκλησίᾳ), and here in 1 Cor 9:21. It means "within the law," "subject to the law, obedient to the law" (BAGD). (CC)

In 1 Corinthians νόμος occurs only in 9:8–9, 20; 14:21, 34; 15:56, and ἄνομος and ἔννομος occur in 9:21. The complexity of Paul's concept of "law" and his use of νόμος is shown by him saying in adjacent verses that he is "not under Law" (9:20), but at the same time he is "obedient to the law of Christ" (9:21). In some passages Paul describes the Gospel as a νόμος, meaning that the Gospel establishes an ordered relationship to God governed by God's Word about Christ, which bestows the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. In that sense Paul speaks of "the law [νόμος] of faith," which is the opposite of the law of works (Rom 3:27). He also states that "the law [νόμος] of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law [νόμος again!] of sin and death" (Rom 8:2) (CC)

Gentiles, i.e., non-Jews. (TLSB)

The Gentiles did not have to feel that they should become Jewish in order to become Christians. (PBC)

but under the law of Christ. Paul accommodated himself to Gentile culture when it did not violate his allegiance to Christ, though he still reckoned that he was under God's law and Christ's law. (By "Christ's law" Paul is probably referring to Christ's teachings, though the term is not necessarily restricted to them.) (CSB)

A play on words. Paul is not "under the Law" (v 20), but neither is he lawless. Rather, he is "under the law of Christ," transformed for a life of service to God and neighbor (cf Rm 7:25; Gal 6:2, 15–16). (TLSB)

9:22 The Majority Text and a number of other manuscripts insert ὡς ("as") between ἀσθενέσιν and ἀσθενής. "To the weak I became *as* weak" (NKJV; emphasis added; similarly KJV). That way Paul would not actually say that he *was* weak. But it is most likely that ὡς was added and is not original. (CC)

In 1 Cor 9:22 Paul now brings the argument full circle to his original concern for the weak Christians in Corinth (8:7–13). Although Paul himself had the "knowledge" that idols are nothing and that meat sacrificed to them is just meat (1 Cor 8:1–6), nevertheless he humbly identified with the weak and avoided anything that would give unnecessary offense (8:7–13). The expression "the weak" may have a twofold aspect—weak in the sense of vulnerable to peer pressure and more easily led into sin (8:10), and also weak in economic status. Most members of the congregation were not well-educated, influential, or of noble birth (1:26–31). Many of them would have worked with their hands for a living. Paul had not held himself aloof from these humble people but had identified with them by taking up his tent-making trade. Thus he exemplified his own maxim, "Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly" (Rom 12:16 NRSV). It is possible that those who were economically "weak" were more likely to be swayed by the actions of the affluent, while those who flaunted their supposed freedoms to indulge in sinful behavior were mostly the well-to-do. (CC)

Paul's flexibility in accommodating himself to all people was governed by one overriding purpose: "that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22). In this he was modeling himself after his Master, who ate and drank with tax-collectors and sinners (Mt 11:19), accepted water from a Samaritan woman and engaged in conversation with her (John 4), and healed the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:24–30)—all for the great purpose of seeking and saving the lost (Lk 19:10). Just as Jesus had accommodated himself to those around him, without compromising his message, so Paul showed himself a model of missionary adaptability to the language and thought-forms of his hearers. In preaching to Jews, he made rich use of the OT (e.g., Acts 13:16–41). In addressing the Hellenistic Gentiles on the Areopagus in Athens, he drew instead on his knowledge of Greek poetry and philosophy (Acts 17:22–31). Fluent both in Greek and in Aramaic, he could switch from one to the other in order to captivate an audience (Acts 21:37–22:2). He was thoroughly conversant with both Jewish and Hellenistic culture (his familiarity with the latter will shortly become evident in the illustration drawn from the Isthmian Games in 1 Cor 9:24–27). But Paul carried his learning lightly; he did not allow his familiarity with the religions, cultures, and languages of his day to stroke his ego. All was placed in the service of bringing salvation to the lost. (CC)

With all his concern to adapt himself to people, nowhere does Paul suggest the Gospel itself may be changed to suit people's religious or cultural tastes (cf. Gal 1:6–9). In 1 Cor 1:18–25 Paul described how God deliberately chose to save people through the preaching of a message that was “foolish” and “weak”—the very opposite of how people might expect God to save. But in the face of enormous pressure to conform his message to the world's wisdom, Paul was determined to know only Christ crucified (2:2). Through the Gospel, and only through the Gospel, do people find salvation. That is why it was so important that those entrusted with the Gospel “be unoffensive to Jews and to Greeks and to the church of God” (10:32). Paul had set the Corinthians a good example: “I please all people in all things, not seeking my own advantage, but that of the many, that they may be saved” (10:33). They should imitate him, as he imitated Christ (11:1). As one commentator elaborates:

To follow the crucified Messiah means Paul must take up his own cross daily, die to self-interest, and serve the One who bought him. One cannot properly promote the gospel any other way. To promote it this way—by dying to self-interest, giving up all insistence upon the sacredness of one's rights, and striving to win as many as possible—is to follow Christ crucified, who died, literally, to *his* self-interest, gave up all insistence upon the sacredness of *his* very real rights, and set himself to win men and women from every people and tongue and tribe and nation. There is no other way of following Christ; there is no other way of sharing in the gospel's blessings. (CC)

In humbly serving the Gospel, Paul hoped that he would join fellow believers in enjoying the saving benefits of the Gospel (9:23). He was well aware of the possibility that he could fail to attain the salvation he proclaimed to others (9:27). Like every preacher of the Gospel, he must remain faithful until “the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:8; see also 3:13; 5:5). (CC)

the weak. Those whose consciences are weak (8:9–12). (CSB)

Paul affirms the importance of learning about, respecting, and identifying with one's hearers in order to reach them effectively. (TLSB)

I became weak. Paul did not exercise his Christian freedom in such things as eating meat sacrificed to idols (8:9, 13). (CSB)

I have become all things – Where no principle was at stake Paul was prepared to go to extreme lengths to meet people. Every true servant of Christ must learn from the apostle not to despise anyone, not to permit disgust over foolish weaknesses to enter his heart.

κερδήσω ... σώσω—After using κερδαίνω (“to win”) five times in 9:19–22, Paul concludes this section of his argument with the parallel verb σώζω, “to save.” This makes it clear that what he means by winning people is securing their eternal salvation. σώζω has this same meaning in 1:18, 21. In 7:16 he spoke of the Christian husband or wife saving (σώζω) the unbelieving spouse by bringing him or her to faith. (CC)

9:22-23. *all men... πᾶσιν ... πάντα ... πάντως ... πάντα*—The repeated use of the noun and the adverbial form of “all” underlines the apostle's determination. (CC)

9:23 blessings. The blessings of realizing that he has been faithful to Christ in preaching, of hearing the Lord's “Well done” (Mt 25:21; Lk 19:17) and of seeing others come to Christ. (CSB)

Salvation and life in Christ. “Knowledge” of God is not sufficient (8:1); those who lead others to sin, and destroy their faith, sin against Christ (8:12). In so doing, they destroy their own faith. (TLSB)

The Greek text merely has “in order that I may become a joint sharer of it,” namely, of the gospel. That would include the interpretation, “share in its blessings.” (PBC)

συγκοινωνός αὐτοῦ—Literally, Paul desires to be “a fellow [συν] participant or sharer [κοινωνός] in it [the Gospel].” For συγκοινωνός, compare Rom 11:17; Phil 1:7; Rev 1:9; and the textual note on εἰς κοινωνίαν in 1 Cor 1:9. Hauck comments: “By faithful work for the Gospel Paul here hopes to be a partaker of the blessings of salvation which it promises.” (CC)

9:24 *race ... runners.* The Corinthians were familiar with the foot races in their own Isthmian games, which occurred every other year and were second only to the Olympic games in importance. (CSB)

Just as Paul put off his rights in order to share in the blessings of the Gospel (v 23), so should the Corinthians. (TLSB)

οἱ ... τρέχοντες—τρέχω here refers to “foot-racing in the stadium” (BAGD, 1).

ἐν σταδίῳ—NIV translates the phrase, “in a race.” But “in the stadium” is more precise. Cf. ἐν μακέλλῳ in 10:25. Fee explains: “The στάδιον was first of all a measure of distance (about 185 meters); it was naturally transferred to the arena itself, which measured the length of a στάδιον, the basic distance in the races.” (CC)

run. A Pauline metaphor for living the Christian life. (TLSB)

οὕτως τρέχετε—Literally, “so run ...” This verb in the second person plural could be either indicative or imperative. It is most natural, however, to take it as an imperative, as do most English versions. (Cf. Phil 4:1: οὕτως στήκετε ἐν κυρίῳ, “stand firm in the Lord in this way,” NRSV.) (CC)

may obtain – katalabnte – intensified reception, as if to make one’s own. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 13, Part 1)

ἵνα καταλάβητε—καταλαμβάνω can mean “seize, win, attain, make one’s own” (BAGD, 1 a). It is a compound of λαμβάνω, “receive,” in 9:24–25. Here its most suitable meaning is “to win,” and it is in a purpose clause: run in such a way “that you may win.” (CC)

prize. In ancient times the prize was a perishable wreath (v. 25). (CSB)

βραβεῖον—BAGD defines this as a “prize in a contest.” It has this same meaning in Phil 3:14. (CC)

Whether they were wreaths of laurel, or wild olive leaves, or even of parsley, they were paltry prizes compared with the unfading glory of the heavenly prize toward which the Christian strives. (PBC)

9:25 *competes.* πᾶς δὲ ὁ ἀγωνιζόμενος—BAGD, 1, defines ἀγωνίζομαι as “of a(n athletic) contest, lit[erally] and fig[uratively] engage in a contest.” From ἀγωνίζομαι are derived the

English words “agony” and “agonize.” The Greek verb and its related nouns (ἀγών, ἀγωνία) are used not only of athletic contests, but in a more general sense of a “*struggle, fight* only fig[uratively] of suffering for the gospel Phil 1:30 and struggle in its service” (BAGD, s.v. ἀγών, 2). They imply a strenuous effort. Luke uses ἀγωνία to describe Jesus’ anguish in Gethsemane (Lk 22:44). (CC)

self-control. Avoiding what hinders success in the race. Here it is the insistence on “rights” that destroy the faith of others. (TLSB)

πάντα—This accusative of general reference (BDF, § 154) answers to the πάντα in 9:23. Pfitzner sees this as the “catchword” of chapter 9. Fee comments, “As the athlete exercises self-control in ‘all things’ for the sake of the victor’s wreath, so Paul does ‘all things’ for the sake of the gospel. By implication [Christians] must also do ‘all things’ in order to obtain the prize.” (CC)

wreath. Lit, “crown.” Olympic athletes received a wreath of olive leaves; other games used laurels, etc. (TLSB)

φθαρτὸν ... ἄφθαρτον—Cf. BAGD, s.v. φθαρτός: “*perishable, subject to decay or destruction.*” These adjectives occur also in Rom 1:23; 1 Cor 15:52, 53, 54; 1 Pet 1:4, 18, 23. The words φθείρω, φθορά, and φθαρτός are “often used to denote the corruptibility of man, his subjection to death.” Whereas God is ἄφθαρτος, “incorruptible” (Rom 1:23), people as creatures of flesh and blood belong to this corrupt aeon which, with all its creatures, is passing away. The body is sown in corruption (φθορά, 1 Cor 15:42, 50) but is raised in incorruptibility (ἀφθαρσία, 15:42, 50, 53, 54). In the new aeon the dead will rise “incorruptible,” ἄφθαρτος (15:52), in Christ and receive an inheritance which is ἄφθαρτος (1 Pet 1:4). (CC)

an imperishable – The eternal prize of life with God through faith in Christ (cf v 23). (TLSB)

Aphtharton – imperishable, not subject to decay or death. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 13, Part 1)

9:26 So. τοίνυν—Cf. BAGD, s.v. τοίνυν: “inferential particle *hence, so, indeed.*” (CC)

I. ἐγώ—Placed at the beginning of the sentence, the personal pronoun “I” is emphatic. Again Paul is picking up the theme of his personal example (cf. 1 Cor 9:15–23).

not ... running aimlessly. See Php 3:14. (CSB)

Continuing the metaphor, Paul says that training for no purpose will not produce the desired result, which is life with God (cf v 25). (TLSB)

ἀδήλως—Cf. BAGD, s.v. ἀδήλως: “*uncertainly ... of a race οὕτως τρέχω ὡς οὐκ ἀδήλως not aimlessly, i.e., not as one who has no fixed goal.*” The adjective ἄδηλος means “not clear, unseen” (BAGD, 1) and is used of graves which are not seen (Lk 11:44). It can also mean “indistinct” (BAGD, 2) and is used of an indistinct sound from a trumpet (1 Cor 14:8). Paul uses the noun ἀδηλότης of the “uncertainty” of riches (1 Tim 6:17). (CC)

That is not running straight for the goal. (PBC)

box – *πυκτεύω*—The verb is used only here in the NT. In secular Koine Greek it denoted fistfighting, and the related noun *πύκτης* denoted a boxer. Boxing was a sport done in the stadium and in athletic clubs (MM, 559). (CC)

Beating the air. *ἀέρα δέρων*—*δέρω* means to *beat* and is used of the beatings to which the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles were subject (e.g., Mt 21:35; Jn 18:23; Acts 5:40). The sophists of Alexandria are accused of only “beating the air.” (CC)

9:27 *I discipline my body and keep under control.* Here Paul uses the figure of boxing to represent the Christian life. He does not aimlessly beat the air, but he severely disciplines his own body in serving Christ. (CSB)

ὕπωπιάζω μου τὸ σῶμα—Literally, “I give my body a black eye.” This is an extension of the imagery from boxing (9:26b); the verb, used symbolically, means to “treat roughly, torment, maltreat” (BAGD, s.v. *ὕπωπιάζω*, 2). (CC)

δουλαγωγῶ—Most English versions soften this verb (e.g., REB: “bring it under strict control”; KJV: “bring it into subjection”). But NRSV renders it precisely (“enslave it”), as does NIV (“make it my slave”). This rendering preserves the connection with the theme Paul enunciated in 7:22, that the free Christian is nevertheless the slave of Christ (*δοῦλος ... Χριστοῦ*), a pattern Paul has exemplified in his own ministry (9:19; cf. Gal 5:13). (CC)

To live with a purpose, to intentionally seek the good of others. “He clearly shows that he was keeping his body under control, not to merit forgiveness of sins by that discipline, but to keep his body in subjection and prepared for spiritual things, for carrying out the duties of his calling” (AC XXVI 38). (TLSB)

He forces his unwilling and rebellious body to his will. He gives it a knockout blow and he “makes it know its master” (NEB)

should be disqualified. Paul realizes that he must with rigor serve the Lord and battle against sin. If he fails in this, he may be excluded from the reward (see 3:10–15). (CSB)

ἀδόκιμος—The adjective means “not standing the test ... disqualified” (BAGD). Here Paul may be alluding to *δοκιμάζω* in 1 Cor 3:13, where he spoke of each person’s work being tested by fire on the Lord’s day. But there he is speaking of Christians, each of whom will be saved, even if his work does not pass the test (3:15). Here in 9:27, Paul refers to the possibility that he could lose the salvation in Christ which he preached to others. (CC)

The result of seeking one’s way and destroying the faith of others; summarizes vv 23–24. (TLSB)

Paul proceeds to illustrate the need for self-discipline if he is to reach the goal of saving as many people as possible (9:22). As a resident of Corinth in A.D. 50–52, he had probably witnessed the Isthmian Games in the spring of A.D. 51. This prestigious event, second only to the Olympic Games, was celebrated every two years about ten miles from Corinth. The basic athletic events included racing, wrestling, jumping, boxing, hurling the javelin, and throwing the discus. Paul begins with an illustration from the footraces in the stadium. A number of runners competed in each event, but only one could win the prize. The analogy to the Christian life is, of course, imperfect, for in the Christian race all believers are prize winners. But Paul uses the analogy only to point to the exertion and self-discipline required of the successful runner. He challenges the Corinthians: “Run that you may win” (9:24). (CC)

Every entrant in the Olympic Games was required to devote ten months to strict training. Presumably the same rule applied to the games at Isthmia. As is well known from such contests both in ancient and modern times, the competitor must renounce not only bad habits, but give up many things that are fine in themselves, in order to focus totally on preparation for the goal. The theme of self-control applies equally to the Christian life (9:25). Self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit that should be found in the lives of all Christians (Gal 5:23; 2 Pet 1:6). It is one of the qualities essential in a minister of the Gospel (Titus 1:8). Whereas contestants in the Isthmian Games exercised self-control in order to win a wreath of withered celery and some ephemeral honor and glory, it is infinitely more worthwhile for the Christian to practice self-control, for the crown awaiting him—if he completes the race—is the imperishable gift of eternal life (2 Tim 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4; Rev 2:10). (CC)

Paul now applies the imagery of the stadium to his own example as the Corinthians' apostle (1 Cor 9:26). It was not his practice to run the race of the Christian life aimlessly (2 Tim 4:7), like someone with no clear goal. Rather, he pressed on “toward the goal for the prize [βραβεῖον, as in 1 Cor 9:24] of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14). (CC)

Likewise, in fighting “the good fight” (1 Tim 1:18; 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7), he did not behave like a boxer flailing the air and never landing a blow. We cannot be certain whether Paul has in mind the poor boxer who continually misses his opponent or the man who prefers shadowboxing at home or in the gymnasium and never steps into the ring. Paul could see no purpose in activities that did not serve the Gospel and the edification of the church. (In 1 Cor 14:9, Paul will tell those who speak in tongues without an interpreter, “you will be talking into the air.”) (CC)

By contrast with such feeble efforts, his practice is to keep his body in check, so that it continually serves the great goal (cf. Heb 12:11–12). Paul is not here advocating asceticism or self-flagellation as a means to the individual's private spiritual ends. Rather, he is calling on Christians to give up whatever does not advance the cause of the Gospel. Paul himself gave up many things that he could have claimed a right to have (1 Cor 9:4–6, 11–12, 15, 18). He calls on Christians to avoid doing anything that offends others (8:9–13). Christians should forego their rights “*for the sake of others in the community,*” placing their bodies at God's disposal as a “living sacrifice” (Rom 12:1) devoted to winning others for the Gospel. (CC)

By thus disciplining himself, Paul's faith was active in loving service to all. If he were to live a life of self-indulgence, he would endanger not only the salvation of others, but also his own. The danger of being disqualified is real. Disqualification would mean nothing less than missing out on the crown of life, as the context makes clear (1 Cor 9:24–25). Paul has been devoting his life to commending the benefits of the Gospel to others. These benefits are worth having; Paul wants a share in them himself (9:23). What a tragedy it would be if, after preaching to others, he would be found to be no longer “in the faith” (2 Cor 13:5–6), because he had become complacent and fallen in love with the things of this world (James 4:4)! The implication for the Corinthians should be obvious: it would be a tragedy if they forfeited their salvation by ceasing to exercise self-control and thus relapsing into idolatry. Paul will now elaborate that message in 1 Corinthians 10. Christians must constantly exercise self-discipline, restraining their sinful nature and putting it to death by the power of the Spirit, so that they may live for God—now and in eternity (Rom 8:13). (CC)

Ch 9 As founder of the Corinthian Church, and as an apostle, Paul is perceived to have more “rights” than anyone else. Yet he consistently sets an example for the Corinthians, encouraging them to put off their own rights in order to serve one another. This is taught and modeled by Jesus

Himself (Mk 10:45). His death and resurrection transform our lives so that we do not seek our own good but the good of others (Php 2:1–11). • Praise God, who Himself became human like us in order to save us! Strengthen us, O Lord, to serve others in all things, so that all people might come to know the power of Your death and resurrection. Amen. (TLSB)