SMITH FOR CHRIST

TEACHING THE WORD · LIVING IN THE LIGHT

†
9:22

DEEP DIVE

1 Corinthians

Chapter Nine, Verses 1–27

Free from All, Slave to All — the apostle who had every right and laid every right down for the gospel

NASB 1995 | VERSE BY VERSE | FOUR VOICES | WITH DIAGRAMS

Paul proves he has the right to be fed by the gospel — and then tells the Corinthians why he never used it. Chapter 9 is chapter 8 lived out: a free man who made himself a slave to all, and a runner who trains for a crown that will not wither. Read through four teachers — **David Guzik**, **R.C. Sproul**, **C.H. Spurgeon** and **Matthew Henry** — with the Greek behind Paul's key words.

THE PASSAGE

1 Corinthians 9:1–27

rights · refusal · slave to all · the race

THE METHOD

Verse by Verse

Color-coded by teacher

WHAT'S INSIDE

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Five movements from "Am I not free?" to "I myself will not be disqualified"

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"For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more." — 1 Corinthians 9:19

SECTION I · THE PASSAGE

1 Corinthians 9:1–27

Free from All, Slave to All — Paul's rights, his refusal to use them, his freedom to serve everyone, and the athlete's discipline it takes

† How to Read This Study

This study walks 1 Corinthians 9 in 5 movements, in Paul's own order. Each movement opens with the full NASB 1995 text of those verses, marked with the Berean colors and shapes; then the Greek behind the key words; then the teachers, each in his own color — **David Guzik**, the pastor who walks the text verse by verse; **R.C. Sproul**, the theologian who presses every word for its doctrine; **C.H. Spurgeon**, the preacher who turns the doctrine into a call to the heart; and **Matthew Henry**, the Puritan commentator who gathers it into plain, practical counsel. The figures draw the argument so you can see where Paul is going. Read the Scripture first; then let each voice add its angle.

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word
R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries
C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle
MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

HOW THIS STUDY IS MARKED
God — His character & actions
Command / instruction
Key repeated word
Sin / warning
Promise / blessing
Time / place / contrast

KEY VERSE · 1 CORINTHIANS 9:22

"To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some."

† Before the Passage

Chapter 9 can look like a detour — Paul suddenly defending his apostleship and his pay in the middle of a discussion about meat offered to idols (chs. 8–10). It is not a detour. Chapter 8 ended with Paul's vow: "if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble" (8:13). The "strong" at Corinth were insisting on their "right" — the very word Paul used in 8:9, "this liberty of yours" (*exousia*). Chapter 9 answers with a life: here is a man with far bigger rights than a temple meal, and here is what he did with them.

There was a second reason. Some at Corinth doubted that Paul was a true apostle at all, apparently because he worked with his hands instead of taking their support. Paul had made tents alongside Aquila and Priscilla when he founded the church (Acts 18:3), and he would later ask, "did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge?" (2 Cor 11:7). Greek

culture looked down on manual labor, and Corinth was full of traveling teachers who sold their wisdom. Paul refused to look like one of them — and some Corinthians thought less of him for it.

Paul's Old Testament roots here are the Law of Moses — "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing" (Deuteronomy 25:4) — and the priests who lived from the altar (Numbers 18; Leviticus 7). Behind verse 14 stands Jesus Himself: "the laborer is worthy of his wages" (Luke 10:7), which Paul quotes beside Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Timothy 5:18. And behind verses 24–27 stands the city itself: Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games every two years, second only to the Olympics, so every reader had watched runners and boxers train.

Read the chapter as a man on trial who turns his defense into a sermon. He asks nineteen questions (count the question marks — seventeen in vv. 1–13 alone), builds an airtight case for his right, and then says, "Nevertheless, we did not use this right" (v. 12). From there he moves to his reward (vv. 15–18), his freedom to serve everyone (vv. 19–23), and the discipline that keeps him in the race (vv. 24–27). Chapter 10 will then show what happened to Israel when they would not deny themselves.

FIGURE · WHERE CHAPTER 9 SITS



Chapter 9 is the hinge of Paul's answer about idol food: the liberty of 8:9 is the same "right" Paul proves and then refuses in chapter 9.

I
MOVEMENT

1 CORINTHIANS 9:1–6

Am I Not Free?

Paul's credentials, and the rights every apostle had — food, a wife, freedom from manual labor

> [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 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] *My defense to those who examine me is this:* [4] *Do we not have a ⟲ right to eat and drink?* [5] *Do we not have a ⟲ right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?* [6] *Or do only Barnabas and I not have a ⟲ right to refrain from working?*
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 9:1–6

ἐλεύθερος

ELEUTHEROS · "FREE" · G1658

The free man as opposed to the slave (*doulos*) — the citizen who belongs to no master. It is the first word Paul asks about ("Am I not free?") and it returns in verse 19 ("though I am free from all men"), so the whole chapter sits between two uses of it. The SBLGNT puts "free" before "apostle"; the KJV follows later manuscripts that put "apostle" first. Paul's point is that his freedom is not in doubt — what he does *with* it is the lesson. In chapter 8 the Corinthians wanted freedom to use; in chapter 9 Paul shows freedom used up for others.

σφραγίς

SPHRAGIS · "SEAL" · G4973

A seal set in wax or clay to mark ownership and to certify that a document is genuine. Paul says the Corinthians themselves are "the seal of my apostleship in the Lord" (v. 2): a church that exists because of his preaching is God's own stamp on his commission. The same word is used of circumcision as a seal of Abraham's faith (Rom 4:11). Verse 3 then turns to the courtroom: *apologia* (G627), "defense," and *anakrinō* (G350), "examine" — to question a man at a hearing.

ἐξουσία

EXOUSIA · "RIGHT" · G1849

Authority, right, the freedom to act that someone has been given. NASB renders it "right" six times in this chapter (vv. 4, 5, 6, 12 twice, 18); the KJV has "power." It is the same word as "this liberty of yours" in 8:9 — so Paul is speaking the Corinthians' language back to them. "A believing wife" in verse 5 is literally "a sister, a wife" (*adelphēn gynaika*, G79, G1135): a wife who is a fellow believer.

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik reminds us of the context: the Corinthians were claiming a "right," based on "knowledge," to eat idol meat in a temple restaurant, and Paul answers by showing what he has done with his own rights. He lays out three proofs of apostleship — freedom, an authentic sight of the risen Jesus, and the church itself: "The proof is in the pudding." Seeing Jesus alone does not make an apostle; Paul was commissioned on the Damascus Road (Acts 26:12–18). Guzik notes that *apologia* and *anakrinō* are words from the Roman law court, that Peter plainly had a wife, and that the Corinthians thought less of Paul for not taking support — as if real apostles would be paid.

R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries

Sproul's sermon "Paul's Conversion" (Acts 9, St. Andrew's, 30 May 2004) explains why Paul had to write verses like these: the early church faced a serious question about "the legitimacy of Paul's Apostleship." The others had been among the Twelve and eyewitnesses of the resurrection; Paul had not walked with Jesus before the cross, and Jesus had already ascended. But "to be qualified to be an Apostle, one must have been called directly by Christ," and on the Damascus road Saul received exactly that — "his chief credential." Sproul calls the account itself an *apologia* for Paul's credentials, the same word Paul uses in verse 3.

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry sees Paul answering "cavils" from false brethren who were busy lessening his reputation in the very city where he had done the most good. "It is no new thing for faithful ministers to meet with the worst treatment where they might expect the best." Paul's proof is the church itself: "Your conversion by my means is a confirmation from God of my mission." He had labored nearly two years among them, so "It was aggravated ingratitude for this people to call in question his authority." On verse 5 Henry notes that Paul was single, yet "had a right to take a wife when he pleased," and to expect the churches to support her too.

II
MOVEMENT

1 CORINTHIANS 9:7–14

Do Not Muzzle the Ox

Soldier, farmer, shepherd, the Law, the altar and the Lord — the worker should be fed by his work

7 *Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat the fruit of it? Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock?* 8 *I am not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does not the Law also say these things?* 9 *For it is written in the Law of Moses, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING." God is not concerned about oxen, is He?* 10 *Or is He speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher to thresh in hope of sharing the crops.* 11 *If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?* 12 *If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.* 13 *Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar?* 14 *So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.*

1 CORINTHIANS 9:7–14

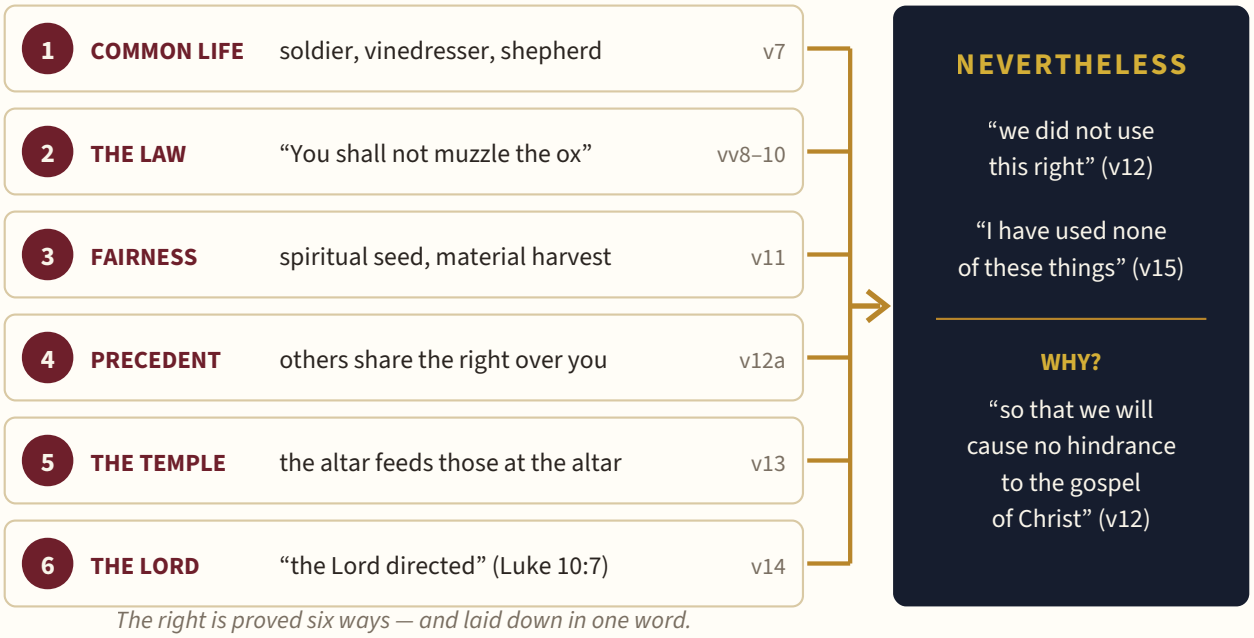
"You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing."

DEUTERONOMY 25:4

"Stay in that house, eating and drinking what they give you; for the laborer is worthy of his wages. Do not keep moving from house to house."

LUKE 10:7

FIGURE · SIX REASONS AND ONE NEVERTHELESS



The right is proved six ways — and laid down in one word.

Read down the left column — Paul builds his case for support six ways — then see the single word that sets it all aside for the gospel.

φιμόω

PHIMOŌ · "MUZZLE" · G5392

To muzzle, and figuratively to silence — Jesus "muzzled" the Sadducees (Matt 22:34) and told the storm "be still" with the same verb (Mark 4:39). The SBLGNT text of verse 9 actually reads the rarer *kēmōseis* (from *kēmoō*, listed by biblehub as 2777b), while many manuscripts and 1 Timothy 5:18 have *phimōseis*; both mean the same thing. The threshing ox walked in circles over the grain; to muzzle him was to make him work beside food he could not touch. Paul's question, "God is not concerned about oxen, is He?" expects the answer: not *only* oxen.

ἐγκοπή

ENKOPĒ · "HINDRANCE" · G1464

Literally "a cutting in" — a trench cut across a road to stop an army, a break in the way. It occurs only here in the New Testament. Paul would rather "endure all things" than cut a trench across the gospel's road. "Endure" is *stegō* (G4722), "to cover, bear up under" — the same verb as love that "bears all things" in 13:7. Verse 14's "directed" is *diatassō* (G1299), to give an order: Jesus commanded that preachers be supported (Luke 10:7).

πνευματικὰ … σαρκικὰ

PNEUMATIKA … SARKIKA · "SPIRITUAL … MATERIAL" · G4152, G4559

"If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?" (v. 11). *Sarkika* is "fleshly" — the KJV keeps "carnal things" — but here it carries no moral blame; it means food, shelter, money, the things of the body. Paul weighs the two harvests side by side: the eternal against the earthly. Henry: "What they had sown was much better than they expected to reap."

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik walks the three pictures — the soldier is supported, the farmer eats from his field, the shepherd drinks from his flock — and then the Law. Deuteronomy 25:4 was a humane law for a working animal, but it states a larger principle; he quotes Wiersbe, "Since oxen cannot read, this verse was not written for them," and Calvin's warning against "empty-headed" allegory that turns "dogs into men." The problem was not that Corinth supported no one; they refused to support Paul. Yet Paul would not use the right: "Paid or not paid, it did not matter to him. What mattered was the work of the gospel." Today's minister may take or decline support, whichever serves the gospel — but if he takes it, "he should work hard to earn that money."

C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle

A short sermon outline on this passage, "The Baffle [Battle] of Life," is collected on biblehub under Spurgeon's name (no date or number is given). It takes verse 7's soldier — "Who goes a warfare any time at his own charges?" — as a picture of every Christian's life: a war against the world, the flesh and the devil, demanding courage, patience, perseverance and zeal. "It is wise to begin the battle of life early." "You may be defeated." But no soldier pays his own way: "You cannot go this warfare in your own strength," and the outline points to God's providence, Christ's help and the Spirit's aid as the soldier's supply. It applies the verse to the believer rather than to the minister's pay.

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry counts five arguments — common practice, the Jewish law, equity, what Corinth gave others, and the temple — and then the institution of Christ. "It is very natural, and very reasonable, for ministers to expect a livelihood out of their labours." The ox law teaches that "Those that lay themselves out to do our souls good should not have their mouths muzzled." He presses the ingratitude: "What, get so much good by them, and yet grudge to do so little good to them!" Yet Paul waived the right, and "He is likely to plead most effectually for the rights of others who shows a generous disregard to his own." A minister "may waive his right, as Paul did, without being a sinner; but those transgress an appointment of Christ who deny or withhold it."

III
MOVEMENT

1 CORINTHIANS 9:15–18

Woe Is Me If I Do Not Preach

Preaching is a compulsion; offering the gospel without charge is Paul's reward

> 15 *But I have used none of these things. And I am not writing these things so that it will be done so in my case; for it would be better for me to die than have any man make my boast an empty one.* 16 *For if I preach the* ⟲ *gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for* ⚠ *woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.* 17 *For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have* △ *a stewardship entrusted to me.* 18 *What then is my reward? That, when I preach the* ⟲ *gospel, I may offer the* ⟲ *gospel* ☆ *without charge, so as not to make full use of my* ⟲ *right in the* ⟲ *gospel.*
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 9:15–18

καύχημα

KAUCHĒMA · "BOAST" · G2745

A ground of boasting, the thing one glories in. Paul would rather die than have anyone "make my boast an empty one" (v. 15; *kenoō*, G2758, to empty out). His boast is not that he preaches — "I have nothing to boast of" (v. 16) — but that he preaches free. The noun appears three times in 1 Corinthians (5:6; 9:15, 16). In 5:6 the Corinthians' boasting was "not good"; here Paul's boast is a gift he gives away.

ἀνάγκη

ANANKĒ · "COMPULSION" · G318

Necessity, constraint — something laid on a man that he cannot set down. "I am under compulsion" is literally "necessity lies upon me" (KJV "necessity is laid upon me"). Then *ouai* (G3759), "woe," the prophets' cry of judgment, which Paul turns on himself if he keeps silent. Verse 17 sets *hekōn* (G1635), "voluntarily," against "against my will": either way Paul has *oikonomia* (G3622), a household steward's trust (KJV "dispensation"). A steward does not get paid extra for doing his job.

ἀδάπανος

ADAPANOS · "WITHOUT CHARGE" · G77

"Costless," requiring no expense — found only here in the New Testament. Paul's reward (*misthos*, G3408, wages) is to make the gospel cost his hearers nothing. "So as not to make full use of my right" translates *katachraomai* (G2710), to use something to the full — or to misuse it (KJV "abuse"). The reward for preaching free is the joy of having given something God did not require.

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik is careful that Paul is not hinting for money ("Nor have I written these things"). Paul's boast was not that he preached — he had to do that — but that he did it without asking his hearers for support. Greek culture looked down on manual labor, yet the work that embarrassed the Corinthians did not embarrass Paul at all; he boasts of it. "Woe is me" shows a man under a call: "He did not just have 'preacher's itch.'" With "religious entrepreneurs" everywhere preaching for money, Paul distanced himself by never taking an offering. Then Guzik turns it on every reader: "what rights are you willing to sacrifice for the cause of Jesus?"

R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries

Sproul never treated "call" as one thing. In an Ask R.C. answer (July 2014) he says the New Testament uses "to call" in more than one way: the outward call of the gospel to all who hear, the inward, effectual call that brings the elect to faith, and a vocational sense, "where God calls us to a particular task, or a particular ministry, or a particular career." His series *Knowing God's Will* gives a whole message to "The Internal & External Call," teaching that every believer has "a God-given vocation," though "finding it will take some work." Paul's "compulsion" in verse 16 is a call of the vocational kind laid on him with unusual force — his Damascus commission.

C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle

Spurgeon preached verse 16 as a young man, “Preach the Gospel” (New Park Street, 5 August 1855, NPSP No. 34). He asks what it is to preach the gospel — the whole counsel of God, Christ exalted, salvation by faith — and why the preacher has nothing to glory of: “He who preaches best feels that he preaches worst,” and “God reminds us that all our gifts are borrowed.” Even so, “Pride will grow on a rock as well as in a garden.” The necessity is a divine call he cannot resist: “He must preach.” The woe is a lost world accusing the silent minister. “Let the sun stop shining, and we will preach in darkness.”

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry reads Paul’s “glorying” not as conceit but as “a high degree of satisfaction and comfort.” He would rather die than have it “justly said that he preferred his wages to his work.” “It is the glory of a minister to prefer the success of his ministry to his interest.” Preaching itself is no matter of liberty — “woe be to me, if I do not preach the gospel” — but taking no pay is, and “It is a high attainment in religion to renounce our own rights for the good of others.” On “voluntarily” he writes, “Leave the heart out of our duties, and God abhors them.” Willing or not, every minister holds a stewardship and must give account.

IV
MOVEMENT

1 CORINTHIANS 9:19–23

All Things to All Men

Free from all, slave to all — the conduct flexes so that the gospel can be heard

19 *For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.* 20 *To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law;* 21 *to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law.* 22 *To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.* 23 *I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.*

1 CORINTHIANS 9:19–23

FIGURE · FREE FROM ALL, SLAVE TO ALL

FREE FROM ALL MEN → A SLAVE TO ALL (v19)
one goal repeated five times: "so that I might win"

TO THE JEWS	UNDER THE LAW	WITHOUT LAW	THE WEAK
I BECAME as a Jew	I BECAME as under the Law	I BECAME as without law	I BECAME weak
FOR EXAMPLE Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3) *to win them*	FOR EXAMPLE a purification vow (Acts 21:23–26) *to win them*	FOR EXAMPLE no Levitical customs among Gentiles *to win them*	FOR EXAMPLE "I will never eat meat again" (8:13) *to win them*

WHAT FLEXED: CUSTOMS · DIET · MANNER · APPROACH

WHAT NEVER MOVED
"not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ" (v21) · "Christ crucified" (1:23)

Paul's conduct bent toward every group he wanted to reach; the gold bar is what never bent — the law of Christ and the message of the cross.

ἐδούλωσα … κερδήσω

EDOULŌSA … KERDĒSŌ · "MADE MYSELF A SLAVE … WIN" · G1402, G2770

Douloō is to enslave; Paul did it to himself — "I enslaved myself to all." *Kerdainō* is a merchant's word, "to gain, make a profit"; it appears five times in vv. 19–22 (once each in vv. 19, 21, 22, twice in v. 20). The profit Paul is after is people. In verse 22 the word changes to *sōzō* (G4982), "save": winning a man means his salvation, not his approval. Verse 24's "win" is a different verb, *katalambanō* (G2638), to seize the prize.

ἔννομος Χριστοῦ

ENNOMOS CHRISTOU · "UNDER THE LAW OF CHRIST" · G1772

Ennomos means "within the law, bound by law" — its only other New Testament use is a "lawful assembly" (Acts 19:39). Paul sets it against *anomos* (G459), "without law," the Gentile outside Moses. Among Gentiles he lived as one free from the Mosaic ceremonies, but he was never lawless: he was "in-lawed to Christ." The KJV's "under the law to Christ" keeps the same thought. The fixed point of all Paul's flexibility is a Person and His commands.

συγκοινωνός

SYNKOINŌNOS · "FELLOW PARTAKER" · G4791

A co-sharer, a partner (*syn*, with + *koinōnos*, sharer). Paul does all things for the gospel's sake "so that I may become a fellow partaker of it" — he wants to share its blessings *with* those he wins (KJV "partaker thereof with you"). The word appears four times: Romans 11:17; here; Philippians 1:7; Revelation 1:9. The preacher is not above the gospel he hands out; he needs it too.

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik: Paul was free to do what he wanted, but bringing people to Jesus mattered more than using his freedom selfishly. His life looked inconsistent only to outsiders; he pursued one goal. So he took a Jewish purification vow (Acts 21:23–26) and had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3) — not because they were necessary, but to build bridges. Guzik is firm that Paul changed his behavior and approach, not his doctrine (1:22–23), and he quotes Gordon Fee: the passage "has to do with how one lives or behaves among those whom he wishes to evangelize." Paul "was willing to offend people over the gospel, but he wanted to offend them only over the gospel."

R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries

In "The Law of Liberty" (Romans 14, 20 May 2007), Sproul uses Paul's own practice to draw the line. Paul tried to be "all things to all men," and "as a matter of indifference, Paul circumcised Timothy." But when the Judaizers said circumcision was necessary, Paul "resisted them with the full force of his Apostleship." So the stronger brother must be willing to forgo his freedom for the weaker — yet "the church must never allow the weaker brother to establish the laws for the whole Christian community." In a 2009 *Tabletalk* article, "Beauty and the Best," Sproul sets 9:22 beside Jesus' command to shake the dust off (Luke 9:5): "They're both legitimate perspectives on the lost."

C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle

Spurgeon preached verse 22 twice. In "By All Means Save Some" (No. 1170, 26 April 1874) he says Paul "adapted his speech to his audience" — "Adaptation was his forte" — yet "there was never a man more stern for principle than Paul." The motive is love: "you do not love the Lord at all unless you love the souls of others." In "Soul Saving Our One Business" (No. 1507, 1879) he is blunter: "The business of the church is salvation," and missionaries who are content to civilize have sunk below their calling. "To sink myself to save others is the idea of the apostle." And first, pray: never "speak for God to men, until we have spoken for men to God."

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry: Paul was freeborn, depending on no one, yet "He made himself a servant, that they might be made free." Among Jews he kept many ceremonies to remove their prejudices; among Gentiles "He would reason with the philosophers in their own way"; among the weak he forbore his liberty. But there was a limit: "He would transgress no laws of Christ to please or humour any man." Henry glosses "by all means" as "all lawful means," and says plainly, "He would not sin against God to save the soul of his neighbour, but he would very cheerfully and readily deny himself. The rights of God he could not give up, but he might resign his own."

V
MOVEMENT

1 CORINTHIANS 9:24–27

Run to Win

The Isthmian athlete — self-control, an imperishable wreath, a body made to serve

> 24 *Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.* 25 *Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.* 26 *Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air;* 27 *but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.*
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 9:24–27

FIGURE · THE ATHLETE AND THE CHRISTIAN

1 COR 9:24–27	AT THE ISTHMIAN GAMES	IN THE CHRISTIAN RACE
HOW MANY WIN	only one receives the prize (v24)	“Run … that you may win” — Henry: “You may all run so as to obtain”
THE TRAINING	self-control in all things; ten months of strict training	give up even good things — like idol meat (8:13)
THE WREATH	perishable — a crown of leaves that withers (v25)	imperishable — “the unfading crown of glory” (1 Pet 5:4)
THE AIM	a runner off course, a boxer beating the air (v26)	every stride and every blow aimed at the finish
THE BODY	trained into shape for a day’s glory	“I discipline my body and make it my slave” (v27)
THE VERDICT	the umpire rejects: adokimos, “disqualified”	the herald who must keep the rules he announced (v27)

Read across each row: Paul borrows every part of the Isthmian contest — the odds, the training, the wreath, the aim, the body, the verdict — and raises the stakes.

ἐγκρατεύεται

ENKRATEUETAI · "EXERCISES SELF-CONTROL" · G1467

From *kratos*, strength or mastery — to hold oneself in, to have power over oneself. The verb occurs only twice in the New Testament, both in this letter: of the unmarried who lack self-control (7:9) and of the athlete "in all things" (9:25). Its noun, *enkrateia*, is the last fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23). "Competes" is *agōnizomai* (G75), to strain in a contest — our "agonize." The prize is *brabeion* (G1017), the umpire's award (Phl 3:14).

φθαρτὸν στέφανον … ἄφθαρτον

PHTHARTON STEPHANON … APHTHARTON · "PERISHABLE WREATH … IMPERISHABLE" · G5349, G4735, G862

Stephanos is the victor's wreath, not a king's diadem. At the games it was woven of leaves — Henry says "olive, bays, or laurel" — and it was dead within days. *Phthartos* means subject to decay; *aphthartos*, its negative, is the word of the resurrection body (15:52) and of our inheritance (1 Pet 1:4). Verse 26's "without aim" is *adēlōs* (G84), "uncertainly," and "box" is *pykteuō* (G4438), used only here.

ὑπωπιάζω … ἀδόκιμος

HYPŌPIAZŌ … ADOKIMOS · "DISCIPLINE … DISQUALIFIED" · G5299, G1396, G96

Hypōpiazō is a boxer's word: to strike under the eye, to give a black eye (its only other use is the widow "wearing out" the judge, Luke 18:5). "Make it my slave" is *doulagōgeō* (G1396), to lead about as a slave — used only here. "Preached" is *kēryssō* (G2784), the herald's announcing. *Adokimos* is "not approved after testing," rejected; Paul uses it of the "depraved mind" (Rom 1:28) and asks the Corinthians to test whether they are *adokimoi* (2 Cor 13:5). The KJV's "castaway" is a strong rendering.

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik reminds us that Corinth was the center of the Isthmian Games, second in prestige only to the Olympics, and that athletes had to train for ten months before they were allowed to compete. An athlete refuses things that are fine in themselves; so must the Corinthians with idol meat. "Discipline is a weak translation" — the word means "to strike under the eye," and "bring it into subjection" means to lead about as a slave: "his body was the servant, and his inner man was the master." He rejects the flagellants who whipped themselves to pay for sins Jesus already paid. Paul is herald and competitor at once, and "disqualified" here "probably doesn't refer to the loss of salvation… but the loss of reward."

R.C. SPROUL · Ligonier Ministries

Sproul's *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* ("Perseverance of the Saints") faces this verse directly. Some Protestants believe salvation can be lost, citing Hebrews 6 and Paul's concern about becoming "disqualified" (9:27). Sproul answers that perseverance rests not on our ability to hold on but on God's promise to preserve His people: God finishes what He begins, and Christ's intercession restores believers who stumble. Those who fall away were taken with Christianity without embracing Christ (1 John 2:19): those who depart from the faith were never really believers. On that reading Paul's discipline is the way God keeps His own running.

C.H. SPURGEON · Metropolitan Tabernacle

Spurgeon preached "The Heavenly Race" (NPSP No. 198) on verse 24 at the Grand Stand of Epsom Race-Course on 11 June 1858. "It is not starting that wins the race; it is running all the way." He warns that some reach even the pulpit without God's call, and that "it is better to make no profession at all than to be hypocrites" — yet "Those whom God starts never do this, for they are preserved in Christ Jesus." His exposition of verses 22–27 adds: "when a man is saved, he still has to run the Christian race"; "Paul accounted his body to be as a slave to his soul"; and "Paul was not afraid of being cast away by God at the last."

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry hears the Isthmian Games "celebrated in their neighbourhood," but marks the difference: at the games one wins; in the Christian race "You may all run so as to obtain." Athletes keep a strict diet — "It is hard if, for the heavenly crown, you cannot abstain from heathen sacrifices." There is no shadow-boxing in the Christian warfare; the body's appetites must be beaten down: "The body must be made to serve the mind, not suffered to lord over it." Henry takes the warning at full weight: "A preacher of salvation may yet miss it. He may show others the way to heaven, and never get thither himself." A holy fear of himself kept Paul faithful.

VI
THEME

CROSS-REFERENCES

The Passage in the Whole Bible

From the threshing floor to the finish line — where 1 Corinthians 9 reaches back and forward

> *"Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble."*
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 8:13

> *"For the Scripture says, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING," and "The laborer is worthy of his wages.""*
>
> 1 TIMOTHY 5:18

> *"You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me."*
>
> ACTS 20:34

> *"Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge?"*
>
> 2 CORINTHIANS 11:7

> *"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."*
>
> MARK 10:45

> *“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”*
>
> PHILIPPIANS 3:14

> *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;”*
>
> 2 TIMOTHY 4:7

> *“And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”*
>
> 1 PETER 5:4

DAVID GUZIK · Enduring Word

Guzik notes that we have no record of Jesus’ exact words behind verse 14, but that He states the principle twice — Matthew 10:10 (“a worker is worthy of his food”) and Luke 10:8, eating what is set before you.

MATTHEW HENRY · Commentary · 1 Cor. completed after 1714

Henry reads the imperishable wreath through Peter and Paul together: “a crown of glory that never fadeth away, an inheritance incorruptible, reserved in heaven” (1 Pet 1:4; 5:4).

SECTION II · STUDY HELPS

At a Glance

Four voices, one chapter

Four teachers, one chapter. Guzik walks the text and keeps it tied to the idol-meat question; Sproul supplies the doctrine — apostolic credentials, the kinds of call, Christian liberty, perseverance; Spurgeon turns it into a plea for souls; Henry draws out Puritan counsel for ministers and hearers. Sproul has no sermon on this chapter, so his voice comes from sermons and books on its themes; he is absent from Movement II and Spurgeon from Movement I. On verse 27 they genuinely differ in emphasis — read them side by side.

THE MOVEMENT	GUZIK · the text	SPROUL · the doctrine	SPURGEON · the heart	HENRY · the counsel
I · Am I not free?	Free, saw the risen Jesus, the church is the proof; legal words — Paul on trial.	Paul's apostleship was questioned; his chief credential was Christ's direct call.	(No Spurgeon sermon found on vv. 1–6.)	Faithful ministers often get the worst treatment where they might expect the best.
II · The ox	Oxen cannot read; Paid or not paid — the gospel mattered; earn what you take.	(No Sproul source found on vv. 7–14.)	Outline "Battle of Life": no soldier fights at his own charges or strength.	Natural and reasonable to be fed; waive the right if you like, never withhold it.
III · Woe is me	Not preacher's itch but a call; boast of preaching free; what will you sacrifice?	"Call" has more than one sense; every believer has a vocation worth finding.	He who preaches best feels he preaches worst; he must preach.	Prefer the work to the wages; leave the heart out and God abhors it.
IV · All things to all	Behavior flexes, doctrine does not; offend only over the gospel.	Timothy circumcised as indifferent; Judaizers resisted; the weak may not make law.	Adaptation was his forte; the business of the church is salvation.	All lawful means; resign your own rights, never God's.
V · Run to win	Ten months of training; a black eye for the body; loss of reward, not salvation.	God finishes what He begins; those who depart were never believers.	Running all the way wins; Paul was not afraid of being cast away.	All may obtain; a preacher may yet miss heaven — holy fear keeps him.

1 CORINTHIANS 9:1–27 · A COMPARATIVE READING

† Key Insights to Carry

- **Chapter 9 is chapter 8 lived out.** The "right" Paul proves and refuses (*exousia*, six times) is the same word as the Corinthians' "liberty" in 8:9. He answers their claim with his own life. THE GREEK
- **Nineteen questions, then one "nevertheless."** Paul argues like a man on trial — seventeen questions in vv. 1–13 — builds an airtight case, and then sets it aside: "Nevertheless, we did not use this right" (v. 12). THE TEXT
- **Proving a right is not the same as using it.** Henry: "He is likely to plead most effectually for the rights of others who shows a generous disregard to his own." Paul defends every minister's support while refusing his own. HENRY
- **Don't cut a trench across the gospel's road.** *Enkopē*, "hindrance," is a cutting-in that blocks the way — used only here. Paul endured (*stegō*, the verb of 13:7) rather than let money block the message. THE GREEK
- **A steward gets no bonus for doing his job.** Preaching was "compulsion" laid on Paul; his only free gift was to preach without charge. Spurgeon: "He who preaches best feels that he preaches worst." SPURGEON
- **Flex the conduct, never the message.** Guzik (with Fee): the passage is about how Paul lived among those he wanted to reach, not about changing the gospel. Paul "wanted to offend them only over the gospel." GUZIK

- **The weak brother may limit me, but he may not legislate for the church.** Sproul: Paul circumcised Timothy as a matter of indifference but resisted the Judaizers when they made it necessary. SPROUL
- **"Win" is a merchant's word.** *Kerdainō* five times in vv. 19–22: Paul is counting profit, and the profit is people — and then the word becomes "save" (v. 22). THE GREEK
- **Train, don't just try.** Every athlete at Isthmia trained for months and gave up good things. "Self-control in all things" is the price of an imperishable wreath. THE TEXT
- **The herald must run the race he announces.** Paul feared preaching to others and being disqualified himself. Guzik reads it as loss of reward; Henry, as a real danger kept off by holy fear; Sproul and Spurgeon, as the way God keeps His own running. THE TEXT

† Questions for the Table

1 **What "right" am I holding onto — time, money, comfort, a gray-area freedom — that may be cutting a trench across someone else's road to Christ?**

Paul proved his right six ways and laid it down in one word: "nevertheless."

9:12; 8:9, 13

2 **Do I support the men and women who feed me spiritually? What would it look like to stop "muzzling the ox" in my church?**

Henry: those who withhold support "transgress an appointment of Christ."

9:7-14; 1 Tim 5:18

3 **Is there anything in my life I do for Christ that I could not stop doing if I tried — a "woe is me" calling?**

A steward does not ask for a bonus; his joy is in giving what was not required.

9:16-18

4 **Who is the man I am least like at this table or on the yard — and what would it cost me to "become as" him without changing the gospel?**

Conduct flexes; the law of Christ and "Christ crucified" do not.

9:19-23; 1:23

5 **What daily, boring discipline is my recovery or my walk actually riding on right now — and where am I just "beating the air"?**

Nobody wins a race by deciding on race day.

9:24-26; Gal 5:23

6 **Paul feared being disqualified after preaching to others. Where am I helping other men run while I have stopped running myself?**

The herald must keep the rules he announces.

9:27; 2 Cor 13:5

Paul had the right to be paid, to marry, to eat anything, and he laid it all down so that nothing would stand between a lost man and the gospel. That is what freedom in Christ is for. Run like that — free, a servant, disciplined — and the wreath you are running for will never wither.

Teaching the Word. Living in the Light. — Smith For Christ

† Sources

Each teacher's section summarizes the pages below in our own words; short quotations are verbatim from them. Matthew Henry died in 1714 having reached Acts; his *Commentary* on 1 Corinthians was completed after his death by Simon Browne from his notes and method, and is cited under his name as it is published. Henry's Commentary and C.H. Spurgeon (1834–1892) are in the public domain; Guzik and Sproul are summarized — consult each author's own work.

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