

Prayers

Opening prayer

Jesus, my Lord, I have faith in You, but when it comes to putting it into practice, I am too hesitant. Inspire me by the exploits of great Christians of the past, and open my heart to rejoice both in what they have done and also in what you can do through me. Answer my prayer, Lord Jesus, and give me the courage to stand firm according to the faith You have given me. Thank you; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

What has God said to you or revealed to you recently through other people? Pray about these things, and where necessary act on them

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian youth camps.** *Pray for those who have worked over many months to organise such camps and events. Pray that they will be blessed by the Spirit of God who can truly inspire His people to do His work*
- *Give thanks to God for your sight, and pray for those who are blind; remember that those who have impaired vision often possess*
- *Pray for the politicians who are responsible for justice and law in your country. Pray that they will stand against all corruption and seek the good of all citizens*

Meditation

Don't stand back:

Don't let other people do for you
what Your Lord would have you do,
Set yourself to do Your Saviour's work
And be His loved and trusted servant.

Don't let feelings be quickly swayed,
dare to take the hand of Christ,
And draw empowerment from His love
which gives you strength and courage.

Don't let the tempter catch you blind,
keep alert, keep constant watch;
Then take control of every thought
so nothing tempts you backwards.

Don't let the world become your idol,
never seek its false and slavish ways;
Be free to choose the paths of eternal truth
And live by the very Word of God.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 9:15-27

¹⁵ But I have not used any of these rights, neither am I writing this so that they may be applied to me. I would rather die! No one will deny me the reason for my boast! ¹⁶ If I

preach the Gospel, this is no reason for boasting, for a duty has been placed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel! ¹⁷ Now if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not, then I have been entrusted with a responsibility. ¹⁸ What really is my reward, when in my preaching I may make the Gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the Gospel?

¹⁹ Though I am of all people free, I have enslaved myself to all, so that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I was as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) in order to win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I am as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) in order to win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I am weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, in order that I might be sure to save some, ²³ and I do all this for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

²⁴ Do you not know that the runners in the games all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run so that you may make it your own! ²⁵ Those who compete exercise self-control in every way, and they do it to receive a perishable wreath; but we do it for one that is imperishable. ²⁶ Because of this I do not exert myself pointlessly, nor do I box as if beating the air; ²⁷ but I exert my body and enslave it, lest after preaching to others I myself should fail the test.

Review

In the second part of 1 Corinthians chapter 9, Paul releases the brake on his personal emotions. As we saw in the first half, his integrity as an apostle had been called into question (9:1) and this hurt him. The problem arose because in the early days of the church, other apostles received material and financial support from the churches they founded as a matter of course. While Paul upheld this general principle (9:3-11), he had never received such support from Corinth because when he first went there, he judged that to do so would jeopardise his pioneering evangelistic work (Acts 18). It must have been difficult, for not only did Paul receive no support from Corinth, a very wealthy church, but many had turned against him and would not even accept that he was an apostle!

At the beginning of our reading today, Paul says plainly that he had never received support from Corinth and has no intention of doing so. But he is exasperated, and adds for good effect, *'I would rather die! No one will deny me the reason for my boast!'* (9:15), meaning that he will not withdraw his claim to be an apostle. Remember, Paul describes his claim to apostleship in Galatians, where he reveals that Jesus appeared to him and commissioned him as an apostle (Gal 1:16f.). He was not going to allow anyone to deny the reality of his calling.

In the next three verses (9:16-18), Paul turns the argument about the pay of an apostle back to his advantage. Everyone knew that he had never claimed any money, or 'reward', from the Corinthian church, but this, says Paul, is to his merit. He makes two significant points. Firstly, the preaching of the Gospel is not merely done for the sake of financial gain or to make a living (9:17), it is a matter of calling. God calls people to this task, and it cannot be a matter of getting paid, up or as Paul says, 'for reward'(9:16). Secondly, the Gospel is essentially free of charge, and Paul claims that he has illustrated this by making no charge for his services (9:18). Whilst Paul clearly agrees that an apostle should be paid (9:8f,15), he makes a very good argument to say that no one should be paid for preaching the Gospel!

Paul never entirely resolves this conundrum, instead, he picks up on the idea of freedom. In verses 19 to 23 Paul defends his freedom to preach the Gospel to all people, Jew or Gentile, ending with his famous words *'I have become all things to all people'* (9:22). Look carefully however at what he says in verse 20, where he describes his obligation to preach the Gospel to the Jews, written in the past tense, *'I became like a Jew...'* (9:20). In contrast, he describes his mission to the Gentiles in the present tense, *'to those outside the law I am as one outside the law'* (9:31). Interestingly, this fits with what we know of Paul's work from Acts 18, which reports that it was indeed at Corinth, that Paul stopped preaching to the Jews to focus exclusively on the Gentiles (Acts 18:6). Paul's point here is that all he does is in God's service, and he will preach to Jew or Gentile as God directs. He then makes his feelings plain about the matter of financial support; declaring that his motives are purely altruistic, to share God's blessings (9:23).

In the last part of our passage, Paul adds two illustrations that demonstrate the urgency of the Gospel and the effort required to complete it; the athlete and the boxer (9:24-27). They emphasise the personal disciplines and energy required to do God's work, and they highlight the importance of the final goal of this task. The athlete strives to win a race and claim a 'wreath' (9:25) and the boxer gets fit to be qualified to fight (9:27). We might think it too much to talk of 'enslaving' the body in such training, but Paul may be right,

considering the exhaustive regimes of professional athletes today. For Paul, to fail in his task is unthinkable; he must use every means available to fulfil his call.

We should be careful to keep the perspective of this text because Christians have argued over the years about how a church worker should best be paid and whether a preacher should be paid for preaching. In the light of this passage, it is best to separate the two. Surely, a church worker should be paid and supported properly, but Paul's argument that the Gospel is by nature free makes it hard for us to agree that anyone should be paid to preach. By carefully making this distinction, it is possible to resolve the conundrum we face in 1 Corinthians 9. Rather, the whole chapter is a powerful description of the prime importance of preaching to the work of God's church.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- The 'free' Gospel, and Paul's free choice (9:15-18)
- A vision of the Gospel task (9:19-23)
- The athlete and the boxer (9:24-27)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V15 'I would rather die!'

This part of the verse is awkward, and this phrase appears to be an interjection or exclamation by Paul. The meaning of the sentence is discussed in the study.

V17 'if I do this of my own will ... if not ...'

The sentence is carefully constructed but the translator has to be careful not to give the wrong impression. The words 'if not' translate the Greek 'if unwillingly', and I have reduced 'unwillingly' to 'not', because it may otherwise appear that Paul talks about preaching 'unwillingly'. However, the sentence is simply drawing a contrast between preaching from human motives or divine (see study).

V18 'Then what really is my reward ...'

I have translated this whole verse differently. It is a whole question, begging the answer 'none' (meaning Paul receives no reward for this). Below I have copied my translation followed by the NIV version so that you can see the difference.

'Then what really is my reward, when in my preaching I may make the gospel free of charge, so as to not make full use of my rights in the gospel?' PHA

What then is my reward? Just this, that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.' NIV

The issue at stake is how to translate the Greek 'hina' (a particle denoting purpose or consequence) which connects the first phrase with what comes next. The NIV and most other versions break the sentence and translate it 'just this', which is something of a liberty. My version connects the two phrases consequentially, using 'when'. This is not a usual translation for 'hina' but justified here, and it gives a verse that makes sense, rather than one that does not (see study).

The result of this translation is this; the NIV tells us that the 'reward' Paul has for preaching is the Gospel itself. This is a rather abstract implication that is not supported elsewhere in Scripture. In my version however, the question is this, what is Paul's reward when he makes the Gospel free? This question is answered later on where Paul says this; 'I do this for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.' Paul still does not say exactly what these blessings are, but all this makes more sense than saying that the Gospel is its own 'reward'

V22 'So that I might be sure to save some'

The translation most people are familiar with is this; 'that I might by all means save some'. However, the small Greek word 'by all means' also has the meaning 'be certain to', or 'be sure to', and after a number of uses of the word 'all' in this part of the text, I prefer the latter translation and it gives Paul's efforts a sense of confidence rather than blind hope – which it is not!

V24 'all the runners in the games'

The Greek word 'stadio' is used here, which refers to a stadium or auditorium. However, the word itself comes to denote the games held there.

'run so that you make it your own' This translations which is perfectly in order with the Greek words used gives a true sense of personal striving.

The 'free' Gospel, and Paul's free choice (9:15-18)

After reading what Paul has to say about preaching the Gospel in this passage, we might well ask whether he was acting out of his own free will! His commitment to the Gospel is of course, total, but he appears to say in verse 16 that the task has been placed on him and he is unable to walk away from it. I suspect that if asked the question, Paul would have said that he gave up his own 'free choice' when accepting the Gospel by faith and becoming a 'slave' of Jesus Christ (see Romans 7:25f.). It is Paul's free will to be bound to the Gospel and he has accepted that he was called to give his life to preach it; his will has become subservient to God will. In his outburst, *'I would rather die'* (9:15), Paul indicates the strength of feeling he attaches to the task he has been given of preaching the Gospel.

What does Paul mean here by 'preaching the Gospel'? There can be little doubt that Paul used this expression in 1 Corinthians to mean the same as 'being an apostle'. From his point of view, the task of an apostle was to preach the Gospel, and the link is so strong the one term seems to imply the other. This is evidence of the connection between Paul's life and teaching and the work of the apostles generally, as defined by Matthew in his report of Jesus' last words to the disciples, *'go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'* (Matthew 18:19). It is sometimes said that the theology of Paul's letters are very different from that of the gospel is. In this case such a theory is not true.

The important principle set out here in this passage is this, the Gospel is at heart free to those who will receive it. Paul may not have intended to speak about this when he first wrote about monetary payment to preachers, but he did, and it is important. There is absolutely no doubt that in his mind, there should be no financial addition to the preaching of the Gospel, there should be no presumption that those who receive or hear the preaching of the gospel should in any way make any payment for it. Throughout, this implies that any provision required so that the gospel be preached, be met by either the one who preaches or those who support him or her. This is the only conclusion we can draw from this passage of Scripture.

If all this seems a little too obvious, then think again. It is unfortunately common for us to find TV channels purporting to offer the Gospel, but in reality, asking for payment to the church or pastor. The message is delivered as if by sending off payments, the individual will get results either in the form of healing or some unspecified blessing or other benefit. Whether this is intended or not is not the point; the mere implication of it is entirely contrary to Scripture.

A vision of the Gospel task (9:19-23)

Paul's description of himself as 'all things to all people' (9:22), is remarkable enough in itself. However, on reading the text we find that Paul says much more. To begin with, he says that by the Gospel, he is enslaved and not just to Jesus Christ, but to those to whom he preaches; *'though I am of all people three, I have enslaved myself to all'* (9:19). This is a challenging text, for many churches today find it necessary to do their best to protect the individual minister or pastor from over excessive demands upon their time and efforts. Whilst this is a particularly modern problem, we should not ignore what lies behind Paul's words here, which come from the close relationship between what he means by slavery, and the notion of service. What Paul advocates here is the highest standards of service, and no Christian leader should not turn away from that.

Going on further, Paul refers to his work to convert Jews, *'to the Jews I became like a Jew, in order to win the Jews ...'* (9:20). To help his argument, Paul refers to Jews as *'those under the law'*, meaning the laws of Moses, God is revealed Law (see the book of Exodus, especially chapter 24f.). Here, he is careful to say in the midst of his argument that he himself is *'not under the law'*. This is a remarkable thing for a Jew to say, for Paul was still a Jew. Remember, only a few verses previously we read Paul's comments about those who wanted to become 'uncircumcised' (1 Cor 7:18), and Paul said there that no one should try to change their status as either Jew or Gentile. It may seem as if Paul is changing its tune here, but he has not. Paul knows that he remains a Jew but he insists that the power of the law to enslaved him has gone, and he is free in Christ.

Of course, he goes on to build upon this comment. When speaking about the Gentiles, he refers to them as *'those outside the law'* (9:21). His point is perfectly understandable, but in the midst he adds another parenthetical comment, *'I am not free from God's law but and under Christ's law'* (9:21). From Paul's point of view, being a servant of Christ incorporate all that it means to be obedient to God's law, and in this way, his teaching with these completely with that of Jesus, who said that he came to *'fulfil' the law* (Matthew 5:17). So although the emphasis in this passage is upon Paul's claim to be all things to all people, he takes the opportunity to emphasise his teaching that a true Christian is a 'slave', or 'servants' of Christ, teaching found elsewhere throughout Paul's teaching (Romans 7:25, Galatians 1:10, Ephesians 3:7, 1 Timothy 4:6, etc.).

The athlete and the boxer (9:24-27)

Paul's illustrations of the athlete and the boxer has come in for much criticism. To begin with the illustration of the athlete running a race is rather difficult, for if Christians may be said to be runners in a race, surely all of them win the crown? The trouble is this, Paul gives his example not as a general example of Christian discipleship, it only serves one single purpose, and that is to illustrate the effort and training required for anyone to compete and gain sight of the crown. To take this illustration further is beyond what it will bear; it is quite possible to understand this and not allow ourselves to look for anything else with it. As it stands, Paul speaks of the effort and training necessary for running in the race but also the self-control. Of course this may have to be applied in many different ways, but the principles are surely secure.

The next illustration of the boxer (9:26) makes a very similar point about the effort training and hard work necessary for the proclamation of gospel and the work of God's kingdom. Here however, Paul's single and pressing point is more subtle. Some will give the appearance of hard work and training when they are in truth merely shadowboxing, or as Paul says here is *'beating the air'* (9:26). Paul uses this example to say very clearly that those who do the work of gospel as a properly trained and hard working in its execution, will yield visible results. Nothing is for practice, everything is for real. This is a challenging text.

Discipleship

Application

- A reward for preaching the Gospel – preaching fees and payment for church workers?
- Being open about money in church
- The privilege of preaching the Gospel, the nature of God's call

A reward for preaching the Gospel – preaching fees and payment for church workers?

How easy it is to be misunderstood, especially when claiming expenses! As a frequent visiting preacher or speaker, I know what it is like to claim expenses and deal with gifts offered for preaching. In my own mind I have clear guidelines that I ask for travel expense, and I generally accept freely offered gifts for my ministry, but I am cautious about so called 'preaching fees'. It is easy, however, for things to go wrong. For example, I have known churches that have preaching fees for some preachers and not for others, and there are others that give no travelling expenses, and yet others that give no freewill offering.

Being open about money in church

Nevertheless, I have also come across extraordinary generosity, often on the part of individuals, who have more than covered my expenses. I have also known great generosity from those who have little to give, especially when taking funerals or weddings for people. I mention these things not to try and suggest some set of 'good practice', but with the sole intent of speaking openly about what, for some, is a subject not talked about. Too many people who go to church simply do not know how the money given is spent, and this leaves the door open for temptation, and the devil will take any opportunity to create misunderstanding amongst God's servants and misinformation within the church.

The privilege of preaching the Gospel, the nature of God's call

Our passage tells us that it is an enormous privilege to preach the Gospel, and those to whom it is given are to be entirely dependent upon the Lord for what is said and done. It also describes a call in which the preacher is 'all things to all people'. It is perhaps stretching things too far to say that everyone who preaches should be like this, though some certainly need to be if the Gospel is to be preached at the very edges of society and to all people. Today, there is much emphasis on the idea that each one who is called to church leadership has a distinct call which must be identified and fostered. Although this is understandable, it is not easy to find many Scriptures to guide us on that path. Most descriptions of leadership in the Bible (in my opinion) refer to people who are single-minded in their application of a God-given message, which is itself always closely related to God's pursuit of those who are lost.

Lastly, the hard work necessary for the proclamation of the Gospel can hardly be lightened. If we think of the task of preaching the Gospel as limited to the pulpit then we are mistaken, look for example at the work of Paul in establishing the church at Corinth in Acts 18, and you will find that the preaching of the Gospel is more like a challenging and exciting adventure! We are impoverished if we think that a sermon on Sunday is an adequate form of 'preaching the Gospel'. This is a demanding task of itself, but unless it is merely the verbal expression of what God people do in the world, then it does not measure up to the mark of what the New Testament means by 'preaching the Gospel'.

Questions for groups

1. What does this passage of Scripture say to the church today about the payment of wages to a church worker or a preacher. Do you agree that someone should not be paid for preaching? If not how do you square this with the passage today?.
2. What cultural barriers are we being called to cross today in order to preach the Gospel today?
3. Paul used the example of an athlete and a boxer when speaking about training to do the work of the Gospel. What do these illustrations suggest today, and what illustrations might be better?

Discipleship challenges

- *Discuss with a friend at church the policy of your fellowship towards the payment of church workers, and payment for preaching. Do you know what this is, and is this open for scrutiny by members of the church? Consider what can be done to help make for a better policy, if necessary.*
- *Pray for leaders and preachers who do not find it easy to cope with the task God has given them, and who feel that they do not know where to start to gain the help they know they need. Pray with the intention of listening to God for solutions.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, for centuries You have seen and heard Your people commit sin, and struggle to confess it. Come rushing through us now like a torrent of water, we pray, and cleanse us by the power of Your Holy Spirit, so that we may be victorious over all the powers of evil that assail us. Thank You Lord God: AMEN
