**1 Corinthians 9:7-12,19-23** October 17, 2021

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*1 Corinthians 9:7 Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? 8Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn’t the Law say the same thing? 9For it is written in the Law of Moses: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it about oxen that God is concerned? 10Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. 11If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? 12If others have this right of support from you, shouldn’t we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ…*

*19Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. 22To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. 23I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**All I Do Is Win, Win, Win**

*(theme from another pastor at a pastors’ sermon study this week)*

**I. I could win victories for myself by exercising my rights. (7-12)**

A voluntary military is one of the prides of our nation. By that we mean people who willingly serve in the armed forces. They are not forced to serve as soldiers. There is no draft, no mandatory service. No one is driving trucks around looking for people to load into the truck and force into service. Instead men and women serve and defend our nation of their own volition. That’s our volunteer army (and air force, navy and marines.)

But, in another sense of the word, this is not a “volunteer” army. Soldiers do not work for nothing. They don’t volunteer and serve at their own cost.

Asking people to serve in that way would be contrary to any and all sense of fairness. But it is not only soldiers who ought to make an income from their service. This is true of any profession, any work. In addition to soldiers, our reading cites those who plant vineyards and tend to flocks—the sorts of things that were very common in the ancient Mediterranean world. God’s word says that the vineyard owner should drink the wine and eat the grapes. The shepherd should get food and clothing from the animals he takes care of. When we work, we should receive something from our work.

This is so much part of God’s intended world order (not just a capitalist American ideal) that God told his Old Testament people, ***“Do not [even] muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.”*** To envision that we have to go back to a time when field work was done by hand and animal. After the grain was gathered—let’s say barley or wheat—somehow people had to remove the seed hulls from the kernels. One way of doing this on a larger scale than by hand was to have an ox drag a wooden sledge (kind of like a sled except without runners so the whole thing is making ground contact)—run that over the harvested grain. Of course, while the ox is doing this, the ox is going to get hungry and want to eat the grain on the ground. Oxen are big animals. They eat a lot! So the farmer would want to put a muzzle on the ox so that it can’t reach down and eat his grain harvest. God said, “Don’t do that!”

God is so concerned in fairness—that people get what is due them for their labors—that he even tells his people to be fair with the animals they have. God built a hedge around the law for people by including animals in it. God is serious about this!

The connection point between these Old Testament laws and the situation the Apostle Paul was in, was that it is right also for full-time Gospel workers to be supported by their congregations. Our sense of fairness knows that it is not only fair for soldiers, shepherds and farmers to be supported from their work. So, too, in the church.

So Paul concludes about himself, ***“If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?”***

Sometimes you hear about churches that don’t supply a living wage for those who serve them. That has never been the situation here at Faith, and for that I thank God and you. In your thanks to God for his Word and Christ’s saving work, you have rightly made this happen.

**II. Instead I achieve my victories by giving up my rights.**

Well, Paul has made his point. And now I half expect him to present the Corinthians with an invoice. But he doesn’t. He goes on, ***“But we did not use this right [of support from you.] On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.”***

Paul didn’t claim what he had a right to. How did he survive? He preached, and he also worked on the side. His trade was making tents (Acts 18:3; 20:34). How that works, and what income bracket making tents puts you in, I have no idea. It doesn’t sound very lucrative. But it was enough for Paul’s room and board. He gave up his pastoral right to a living from the Corinthians Christians while in Corinth. Paul didn’t do this everywhere he served. Sometimes congregation voluntarily supported Paul and he accepted it. But at Corinth Paul didn’t because of other considerations.

Why? Now we are ready for the second part of the reading: ***[Read verses 19-23.]***

It was a judgment call for Paul. For the sake of the Gospel in Corinth he decided that it would be best not to take an income. He wanted to “win.” Not to win for himself. He wasn’t aiming for nice clothes, good food, a new car and a comfortable retirement. His goal was to “win” for others. His goal was ***“to win as many as possible.”*** His goal was to speak about Christ Jesus. When he spoke about Christ, he wanted as many barriers as possible removed. He didn’t want people to think of him as a money-grubbing preacher. He wanted them to see an earnest and sincere preacher who had no interest in it all other than getting people into heaven through faith in the forgiveness Jesus had won for them.

That’s what Paul did. Now what for us? Should I do the work of a pastor free of charge? Is that our take away? Well, that is something Paul was able to do. But most can’t. He had no family. He had a zeal that perhaps no pastor or missionary has ever had. He had a direct calling from Jesus himself. His call was unique, so we aren’t going to be going down that path. But there is something that we should take away.

There is a difference between what God called Paul to and what he has called us to. But it is a difference in scope, not kind. We are called to do something similar—perhaps not to travel the world and preach the good news of Jesus free of charge. But we too have the task of “winning” others. And here is the connection point: In so doing, we too give up some of our rights for the sake of other people.

This is a frequent theme the New Testament. Even if you don’t know your Bible well, you recognize these: *“Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Carry each other’s burdens.”* In another place it even says, *“What not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?”* At another time Jesus told us, *“If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”* Time and again we Christians are told not to insist on our rights and our way. Quite the opposite. That is how you show love for other people. That is how you love them with the Christ-like love with which Christ has loved you. That is how you gain their hearing.

Is this difficult? Yes, it is! In the best moments, our sense of self-preservation leads us to insist on our own rights. And that is valuable. But most of the time it isn’t that. Most of the time insisting on our rights is about getting to do what we want, autonomy, freedom from having to put up with other people, a battle of the wills.

Paul had no trouble talking about the ways he gave up his own rights for the good of others. When he was around Jews, he would follow their dietary restrictions. When he was around the Greeks, he wouldn’t raise their eyebrows with all kinds of Jewish restrictions on food and conduct. When he was around people with qualms of conscience about who knows what, maybe dress or the way he talked or people who were easily offended, he watched his language and behavior.

Maybe it sounds like he was just a schmoozer, telling people what they wanted to hear. But that wasn’t it. His point was to set up the next conversation, the conversation about Jesus.

What’s more, he didn’t consider it a burden to voluntarily give up some of his freedom. When his freedoms were limited, he didn’t limit his freedom with the griping and complaining we exhibit when our freedoms are limited. The point was to ***“become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.”*** Everything he did was to win, win, win people for Christ Jesus. He kept his eyes on that goal.

We have not been called to dedicate ourselves exclusively to the Gospel the way Paul did. But we have every reason to act, if not the same, then similarly. We can willingly give up things. How can, and why should we willingly give up some of our rights, even God-given rights? Because it is for an even greater good. We have a Savior who did just that for us. If he had not willingly suffered for wrongs he did not do, we would be destined for hell. If he had not willingly given up his rights, the blessing and privilege of heaven could not be ours. We can give up some of our momentary earthly “rights” because we have a Savior who has forgiven our sins so that every time we go back to God in sorrowful repentance for what we have done, we have total confidence that we are forgiven. We don’t face sickness and death with the panic of people who no hope beyond this life. We have an inheritance stored up for us in heaven. We know our heavenly Father’s promises like in our Epistle reading from last week, *“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”* We have blessing after blessing piled up for us. We don’t need to win. We have won already won in Christ! So our desire is for others to be won for Christ Jesus, even to the point of sacrificially giving up some of our rights for them.

Finally, let’s focus on the word repeated in our reading: ***“win.”*** Not our winning, but ***“…to win the Jews… to win those under the law… to win those not having the law… to win the weak.”*** What does that look like in your and my lives?

This phrase, ***“to win someone”*** comes up a couple other places in the Scriptures. And there it does talk to people like you, not just apostles. This is how we win people: Matthew 18:15, *“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”* Same word in English and Greek. The way we win people over is dealing with them in respect and love, talking about sin and grace issues. The way we win them over is realizing that the most important thing we can do for anyone is that we and they walk together in Christ, repentant and forgiven.

Another place this same “win over” phrase is used is in 1 Peter, chapter 3. Apparently, these words were written to a group of Christians with several believing women who were married to unbelievers. Peter encouraged them to *“win their husbands over”* even without words, by their godly behavior: A behavior that was humble and ever busy doing the beautiful works that Christians do.

Point is, winning over people like Paul did doesn’t require that you travel the world like Paul did. It’s something that happens in your life. It happens when you give an inch, a foot, a mile, and in giving up, you win, win, win. You win people for Christ. One way to be part of that at Faith is by joining us for our outreach meeting today after worship, giving up a little time for others.

And so we are back looking at what Paul did in Corinth and left to ask how we can do that in our own callings and lives: as husbands and wives; as employees and employers; as neighbors and friends. We are a volunteer army for Christ. We remember that if someone had not gone out of His way for us, we would not have our privileged status before God.

Therefore we willingly put aside some of what we could claim for ourselves that we can win and save others. Amen.