

Title: The Gospel, for Free

Text: 1 Corinthians 9.15-18

Theme: to pay or not to pay

Series: 1 Corinthians #35

Prop Stmt. We can't show off Jesus if we are concerned about our rights.

I do not recall a series of sermons stirring up as much discussion as these sermons have from 1 Corinthians 8-9, with the possible exception of Romans 9, some years ago. But, quite frankly, I am very, very encouraged by that. Think about it! This entire section (8.1-11.1) is addressing how a church family is supposed to deal with difficult and debatable issues. So, the fact that some of you are discussing and talking about some of these things is, I think, reflecting the fact, that the Word of God is affecting you in the way it was intended to affect you.

We are so used to deceptive forms of communication that it is so difficult to have and experience genuine relationships. Go back to Tuesday night. The president gives the annual state of the nation speech where he addresses both houses of Congress. At the end of the speech we are treated to an endless parade of talking heads who have to tell us what the president said, because we are obviously unable to listen for ourselves. A major part of the conversation is based on the assumption of, "I know what he said, but what do you think he really meant." In other words, when the president speaks, he is not saying what he really means, he is using coded words, or is bluffing, or is hiding something. Now, is there any basis in history or your experience that would ever lead you to believe that it is possible for a president or a politician to lie? Of course, you answer. It sort of goes back to the old joke of, "how can you tell when a politician is lying?" ...whenever his lips are moving! But, since we know and experience the fact that people attempt to deceive us, it is easy to live with a hardened shell toward our world and even toward God. Is that not the line that Satan sold to Adam and Eve in the garden? "Look, I know what God said, but here is what he really meant."

We know that people do not always speak the truth. In fact, in many work settings and family settings and even in so called friendships, there is an incredible amount of pretending and double talk that takes place. Saving face, image, reputation, are part of the games that people play. I am convinced that one of the contributing factors to the high level of anger and depression that many students experience is because they have discovered that adults and peers alike lie. We want authenticity, but most of us would not know what to do with it, if we found it. We may even crucify it, like some people did. Being open and honest is threatening. So, when someone is speaking the truth, it can make things a bit uncomfortable. In a way, that is what we have experienced in this section. We are learning how important relationships are in the church family. For some people these relationships are all that they have. Even if that is not the case, the way in which we relate to each other is a reflection of the very message that we embrace and preach.

The message of the church is that of truth. The messengers of the church have to be people of truth. But since we are so used to being lied to, it is difficult to actually believe

a person. We bring to almost all of our relationships a presumption that the other person is hiding something. What do you really mean? What do you really want? What are you really trying to get out of this? And unfortunately this is often the case. Go back and review some of your conversations this past week. How many of them dealt with the exploration of motives? “Oh...I know why you said that.” “I’ll bet that you were thinking such and such...” We make presumptions based upon the fact that people have lied to us and we have deceived others with our words. But, that presumption makes good, honest communication such a challenge, and so rare. It also makes it so compelling.

In this text, you can hear the cry of this man who is anticipating the response of his readers to the illustration that he just used. The illustration is a touchy one. In fact, Paul recognizes that it is so touchy that it potentially swallows up the big idea. The text last week (9.1-14) was loaded with questions, so the two main points of the message were put into question form. The text this week is loaded with declarations. There is only one question in the text, so the two main points of the message reflect these admonitions. Frankly, this is where Paul is really starting to hammer these points home. The questions are designed to get us to think, reflect, consider and then (in the words of that great theologian – Emerill) - BAM!!

1. **Don’t forget the big idea.** (15)

This entire section is dealing with how important relationships are. Relationships would not be important if we were machines. We are not machines. It’s more than the fact that we have feelings, it is the fact that we have been made in the image of God who is Trinity. He is three persons in one eternally unified relationship. When you are treated as a machine, you are frustrated. When you are expected to just work and not relate, you shrivel. When people around you have no consideration for your life, you don’t like it. So, all of this is tied up in the illustration that Paul is using and the point that he is making. He is seeking to point out that relationships in the body of Christ are critically important because they are a reflection of God Himself. Since we are people of the gospel, the gospel has to influence the way in which we treat each other. The gospel humbles us, so we have to be humble in the way in which we relate to each other, especially when we disagree on a matter that is a debatable issue. You may be able to prove your point and argue your position and stand your ground and intimidate and dominate and overwhelm any who would challenge you. And in so doing, you have just blown away the person, or worse, the exercising of your rights, could be the occasion for another brother or sister to stumble into sin. Therefore, your relationship of ministry to another brother or sisters is more important than your rights. Just because you have a right does not mean that you have to exercise that right. Jesus had the right and the authority to destroy those who crucified him. Instead, he died for them and even in his dying prayed for them to realize what they had done. That is the big idea and Paul uses himself as an illustration of this point. But the illustration that he chooses cuts both ways.

He makes the point that as a spiritual leader, he has the right to be compensated for his work. He points out the fact that God made it clear that farmers were supposed to make

sure that even the oxen they used were given food to eat. At the end of v.9, Paul points out the obvious. Do you think that God is ultimately all that worked up about oxen? This point is for us. How much more important are people? Look, if you are going to give your oxen something to eat in order to help you plow...if you are going to put gas in your car, in order to get you to work, shouldn't you take care of those who are helping you deal with the most important issues of life? That is a legitimate point. But that point is only setting up the big idea, which is this. Paul is saying, I have the right to be compensated from you, but I did not use this right.

But I have not used any of these rights. (15)

Why not? Because relationships of ministry are more important than rights. Therefore, when you and another brother or sister in the family are working through a matter that is a debatable issue, remember, your ministry to them and their ministry to you, your relationship with them, your harmony with them, your attitude toward them, your unity with them is more important than you always standing up and demanding your rights.

Ok, but I wonder...what did Paul really mean by this? Don't you think that he was a little put out that the church did not compensate him? After all, why else would he bring this up? He knows what they are thinking. He knows what we tend to think about when people bring up the subject of money and compensation.

And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. (15b)

I did not bring this up to shame you. I did not bring this up to address this subject through the back door. People are funny about money – aren't they? Paul knows this. Money reveals our idols and motives. Paul does not want the illustration to override his point. He did not bring all of this up (4-14) because he was hoping that they would now, somehow start to compensate him. Not at all. He then says in very, very strong terms:

I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. (15c)

Paul recognizes that in his case, particularly with this issue, it would become very, very messy if he was being compensated by the church at Corinth. Oftentimes men, like Paul were compensated by certain benefactors. Well, in this case, the financial heavy-hitters of the congregation also appear to be the people who are at the center of many of the problems. The division in this church was severe. Some of the division was over those who were assuming spiritual superiority over others and some of the division was between the wealthy and the poor. Do you see how Paul's ministry to the poor would be jeopardized if he was being compensated by some wealthy benefactors in the church? There were churches that Paul was compensated by – Philippi being one. In that case, the financial partnership did not hinder the relationship but enhanced it. But not in Corinth. Paul knew that in Corinth this would be a problem because in essence Paul is saying that no one can logically accuse me of seeking personal gain because I am not and will not be paid by you. That frees me to be able to say what I need to say and even more importantly to model for you what it means to set aside your rights for the sake of a

relationship. I would rather die than give up this opportunity to minister to you this way. The boast is this: Here is an opportunity for me to minister just like my Savior. My needs are met. I have what is needed to survive. You do not need to pay me, in fact, I will not take it. That way, I am able to do what needs to be done without working any angles. But then, Paul really ties this together by going back to the gospel.

Since we are studying this in pieces at a time it is easy to lose sight of the fact that this was a letter that Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. I have outlined this letter in order to see his flow of thought and supporting points. (1.18-2.4 – we deal with all problems based on the gospel) But, I don't know that Paul always wrote with my outline in view. I could make a case that this is brilliant writing on the part of Paul as he weaves the theme of the book right back into this text. My guess is that Paul really ate, drank and breathed the gospel, so it is going to come out all of the time. That is what the really big idea is.

2. **Don't forget the really big idea.** (16-18)

All of life is to be lived in harmony with the gospel. All problems are to be addressed in light of the gospel. The very truth that Paul is challenging them with is the truth by which he is living. He does not forget the really big idea. Why is the relationship more important than your right? Why should the strong be careful in how he or she treats the weak? The reason is because I live my life in a manner that is consistent with the gospel.

A. **The gospel eliminates boasting.** (16)

Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (16)

1) **The content of the gospel eliminates boasting.**

The content of the gospel is rather simple, but it is so controversial because it confronts our pride. Think of it. The gospel is based on the fact that God is the Creator and we are the creation. As Creator He made all things, including, the earth, heaven and hell. As Creator, He is Sovereign and He has the right and exercises the right to rule and to do as He pleases. In addition to that, He is a Holy, Sovereign. Everything that He does, He does right. You can question Him, but it is wrong. You can get angry with Him, but you will be judged. He is God, you are not! What's worse is that we are sinners who are deserving recipients of His wrath. You cannot boast about yourself – you are a sinner. We deserve to be under the eternal just and righteous wrath of God. But, God is also Love. He knew that there was no way that we could save ourselves, so He sent us a Savior. He sent His own Son who would live the perfect life in our place and would die in our place so that God's justice would be satisfied which would make it possible for God to be gracious to us and forgive us. You cannot boast about the solution – it is all of Christ. You have to personally repent of your sin and trust in Christ alone as the only One who can save you in order for you to be forgiven and declared righteous in the eyes of God. But God knew that since sin has affected us so thoroughly, He knew that we

could not and would not believe on Him all on our own. So, it is God who gives us the faith to believe in Him. It is God who opens the eyes of our heart to see how desirable Christ really is. It is God who saves us, God who keeps us, God who grows and matures us, God who finishes His work in us and God who takes us home to heaven. I can't boast about a thing! The gospel is the foundational doctrine of the church and since the gospel eliminates boasting, that means that of all places on planet earth and in any group in this world, believers must be humble people.

2) The call (compulsion) to preach eliminates boasting.

If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. (17)

Do you see what Paul is saying here? How can I stand before you and expect anything? I am not in this position as a spiritual leader because of any merit in me, or because of any long range career plan. I did not plan to do this. God hijacked my life and compelled me to do this. I have to do this. Woe to me if I don't. I have no other choice. I am like the prophet who has a message that is burning within me and I have to deliver it. If I don't it will consume me.

Do you see the picture? I have to do this. I have to preach the gospel and I want to preach the gospel. It is like a mother taking care of her sick baby. I have to and I want to. It is like a dad providing for his family. I have to and I want to. Paul is saying, I have nothing to boast about. After all, it was all God's idea. Besides that, the gospel is free.

B. The gospel is free.

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. (18)

So, Paul, what are you getting out of this? I am getting the eternal satisfaction that I preached the gospel to you in a manner that was completely consistent with the gospel itself. I know that there was no distraction in my life that would cloud the meaning of the gospel to you. The gospel is free. You were not charged for it. Salvation is a gift from God that is free. It does not cost you a thing because the price was paid by God in Christ.

Genuine Christianity and the true church is not a means to get power, to get profit, to get position or fame. It is a humble relationship with God through Christ and a humble relationship with each other in Christ. We can't show off Jesus if we live concerned about our rights.

In some major cities in Europe, Islamists have been violently reacting to a cartoon that depicts their leader as being violent. They are violently opposed to being called violent and will kidnap, threaten and kill to prove their point that their religion should not be

characterized as being violent. The Islamic religion is a religion of death. It is promoted by the sword. Power is based in threats and violence.

Genuine Christianity cannot be promoted by a military or political force. It is the truth that goes after the heart and changes a violent heart that is at war with God (and others) and sets that person free.