

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost; October 20, 2023

1 Corinthians 9:7-12, 19-23

“Forgo Your Rights to Forward the Gospel”

What soldier ever serves at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat some of its fruit? Or who takes care of a flock and does not drink milk from the flock? Am I saying this just from a human point of view? Doesn't the law also say this? Yes, it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out grain." Is God really concerned about oxen, or does he say this entirely for our sake? Yes, it was written for our sake, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher ought to thresh in hope of getting a share. If we sowed spiritual seed for your good, is it too much if we reap material benefits from you? If others have some right to make this claim on you, don't we have even more? But we did not use this right. Instead, we endure everything so as not to cause any hindrance to the gospel of Christ.

In fact, although I am free from all, I enslaved myself to all so that I might gain many more. To the Jews, I became like a Jew so that I might gain Jews. To those who are under the law, I became like a person without the law (though I am not without God's law but am within the law of Christ) so that I might gain those who are without the law. To the weak, I became weak so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least some. And I do everything for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in it along with others.

Joe checks the clock on the wall and smiles; it's 4:45. Plus, it's Friday. Plus, it's payday. His smile widens. And then the boss's voice comes over the loudspeaker: due to financial shortages, this cycle the company will only be paying employees with last names that end in A through M. Joe, whose last name happens to be Watson, is most angry about this. He worked his forty hours; he deserves to get paid. Besides, this has got to be illegal! He will call his congressperson on Monday, but for now he's too tired and angry to think about it.

On Saturday morning, Joe visits a new diner for breakfast. He orders eggs and bacon and black coffee. His server says, "Well, we do have eggs on the menu, but we're not serving them right now. You see, that couple over there really hates eggs. Just the smell of them makes them sick." This is so crazy that Joe can't even find the words. If you're a breakfast diner with eggs on the menu, you serve eggs. And if you hate eggs that much, you should eat breakfast at home!

Instead of arguing, Joe decides to get away from this cuckoo clock world. He hops in his car and heads toward the woods for a hike. After an hour of driving, he sees police lights flashing in his rearview. The officer approaches and says, "Sir, I'm giving you a warning. While it's true that the speed limit on this road is 60 and you were only doing 57, it's also true that this is the country, and people out here like to take it slow. So, you'll need to slow down even more."

You and I will believe what Joe believes: that his world has landed on its head. He has the right to get paid; he earned that money. He has the right to order what's on the menu and get it. He has the right to go the limit. It's a strange world Joe finds himself in. But you did you know: it's the world that Jesus Christ calls his followers to live in – but for a very good reason. He calls his followers to surrender their rights for the advance of his gospel.

Before we go any farther, we need to know what the rights of a Christian are. These are not the same rights guaranteed by the founding documents of our nation, although there may be some overlap. A Christian has the right to do whatever God has not commanded or forbidden him to do. We do not have any right as Christians to steal or lie or gossip or lust. Nor do we have the right not to help a neighbor in need or not to gather for worship. These are all matters God has spoken on, and his people will listen to his commands and follow them.

But there are many areas of our Christian life that God leaves up to our consciences, and there we are free to do this or that, to say this or that, to think this or that. And what God tells us today is this: when you, Christian, are free, use your rights and freedoms to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And here's why: the reason the gospel of Jesus Christ exists is because he used his freedom to save you. Today we hear Jesus say: **"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."** As the Son of God, Jesus had the right to demand the glory of heaven and the unending praise of the angels. But he gave up that right; he laid it down and came to serve us. He laid down his rights as the Son of God and came to create the gospel – the good news of salvation. And here's how he did it: **"Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the experts in the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, spit on him, flog him, and kill him. On the third day he will rise again."** That is the end goal of Jesus' gospel work. That is the end goal of his mission, where he lays down his right not only to divine honor, but to basic human dignity. He lays down the right not to be spit on and punched and crucified – all while completely innocent of doing anything wrong! Do you see how Jesus laid down all his rights and freedoms? First by giving up the glory of heaven and becoming a human being. Then, as a human being, surrendering all rights, even to live.

He did it all, Scripture says, to give us the full rights of God's sons. In Jesus' saving work, we have the right to live under God's grace every day, to live in the confidence that heaven is ours and will be forever. We know these rights are ours because after laying all of his down to die for us, Jesus rose in victory on Easter Sunday.

Now, we who have the right to be called sons of God and heirs of eternal life – how will we use our rights and freedoms as God's children? Like Jesus: for the good of the gospel, which is the good news of sins forgiven and the promise of heaven.

When you look at Mark chapter 10 that we heard earlier, it's easy to see how difficult this is for Jesus' followers to grasp. Immediately after Jesus announces to his disciples what he will do for them, two of them approach and ask, **"Teacher, we wish that you would do for us whatever we ask."** How are they seeing their rights? Not as freedoms to be sacrificed, but to be insisted on – and then they actually insist on even more than they're entitled to!

And this is the struggle of every sinful follower of Jesus Christ. As soon as I hear the phrase, "my freedoms" and "my rights," immediately my decrepit, sin-soaked self immediately thinks of how I want to use them for me: to advance my station over others, to promote my opinions, to increase my comfort. My rights for me! And so when Christians find themselves facing a decision of what to say or do where God makes no command – where they are free – the thought of the gospel, the thought of serving others by doing whatever is possible to propel that gospel to them – is often not thought of at all. Just me. Just what I want. And that's just un-Christlike. He used his freedom for the gospel, to make it our saving reality.

And he now calls me to recognize where I am free, but then not ask first, “How can I use this freedom for myself?” but “how can I use it for others?” And there is no better way to serve others than to spring the gospel of Christ forward to their hearts. This is Christ’s call: use your Christian rights and freedoms to advance my gospel. Serve others by doing everything you can to get the gospel to them.

First, we must remember how Jesus used his rights as the Son of God. We must remember the right he has given us: to be called God’s children. And that is what we are! Now we use those rights God has given us in this world for the advance of Jesus gospel. If you want to see how, you can not only look at Jesus himself, but also his servant, St. Paul.

Paul had the right to take payment from the Christians in Corinth. He was working for them by preaching to them and teaching them the Word of God. So he asks the Corinthians this rhetorical question: **If we sowed spiritual seed for your good, is it too much if we reap material benefits from you?** And the answer, of course, is no. Missionaries and pastors deserve to get paid for their work. In fact, in another place Paul writes that excellent pastors and missionaries are worth double pay. **But**, Paul goes on, **we did not use that right**. Why not? Because Paul honestly felt that taking pay from the Corinthians would have hurt the cause of Jesus’ gospel. It seems there were scurrilous rumors that Paul was a moneygrubber. Also, baby Christians like the Corinthians could get the wrong idea that pastors and missionaries were too much of a financial burden. So, despite having every right to take payment, Paul stayed up nights to make tents to make ends meet, while preaching and teaching for free. For the advancement of the gospel, he laid down his right to get paid, in order to get the news of Christ to more and more Corinthian hearts.

And that wasn’t the only way he used his freedom to advance the gospel: **In fact, although I am freed from all, I enslaved myself** [I have freedoms as a Christian, but I willingly use them for others!] **so that I might gain many more** [this is all for the gospel of Christ, to get it to more and more people]. **To the Jews, I became like a Jew so that I might gain Jews** [He met them in the synagogues, where they were used to worshipping, even though Paul was free to worship anywhere. When he was with them, he kept the Old Testament dietary laws, even though Paul was free to eat whatever he wanted. When he took a Gentile assistant with him to preach to Jews, Paul circumcised him so the Jews wouldn’t turn away.] **To those who are without the law** [the Gentiles], **I became like a person without the law** [as he acted and ate like a Jew around Jews, he acted and ate like a Gentile around Gentiles], **so that I might gain those who are without the law** [he did it for the sake of the gospel, so that Gentiles could hear the good news and come to faith.] **I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least some. And I do everything for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in it along with others.**

Just to repeat, because sometimes that part about “all things to all people” is used to excuse sin: we are not talking about areas where God’s commands restrict us. We are talking about areas where God leaves us free and gives us the right to do as we choose. In those areas Paul used his Christian freedom to get the gospel to the most people. He forgot about himself and what he wanted, because what he wanted more than anything was to spread the gospel and see people come to faith.

To close, I will give three practical examples of how a modern-day Christian might do this. A Christian has the right to vote how he wants, and to take any political position that does not conflict with God’s Word. He also has the right to speak his mind about these things, and to try to convince others to think and vote the way he does. But, for the good of the gospel, how will he use that freedom right now, three weeks before a contentious election? How will use it especially within the four walls of a place where people come to hear the gospel? For the sake of the gospel, will he not think long and hard about whether this is

the time and place to make use of those rights? Or, understanding the climate and the ease with which people become upset and storm off, will he, for the sake of the gospel that is proclaimed here, lay down the right to advance his politics?

Example two: God's Word gives me no command regarding opera. I am thankful for the right to dislike opera – because I do. Deeply, I do. I have the right to steer clear from it forever. But if I have a friend who does not know Jesus, or whose faith in Jesus is wavering, and she loves opera. Should I use my freedom not only to go to the opera, but to buy tickets and invite her? For the sake of the gospel, so that our friendship might deepen and I might have the chance to speak Jesus' love to her, shall I become all things to all people? As Paul became a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles, shall I even become an opera lover to an opera lover? **I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least some. And I do everything for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in it along with others.**

Last one: Let's say I have a lot of money. And I've done what God has commanded with that money: I've paid my taxes, provided for myself and my family, helped those in need, and given generously to my church. I am now free to use the rest as I choose, and have the right to do so. I am free to buy that Mustang or that vacation home. Will I look for ways – and this takes serious thought! – will I look for ways to spend it that will give me chances to speak about Jesus? Will I go back to that salesperson who I almost got up the nerve to evangelize last time, and use my money to make her a little more willing to listen to me? Will I look for yet another missionary to support? Will I use it to do something nice for a child or grandchild who's wandering from Christ, and use it as a chance to speak the gospel to them one more time?

You see, using your Christian freedom like St. Paul takes thought. It's hard thinking and hard working to become all things to all people for the sake of the gospel. But first, it takes the heart of Christ. It takes the heart that laid down the freedom and rights of heaven to give us the gospel. In his name, and for the gospel's sake: use your Christian freedoms and rights, even when it means laying them down, to send that gospel out to hearts. Amen.