



COMMENTARIES ON “1 CORINTHIANS”

Chapter 9

In 1 Corinthians 9, St. Paul continues his theme of self-sacrifice from chapter eight by using himself as an example. Fr. Lawrence Farley speculates that St. Paul anticipated the Corinthian Christians might become upset at having to sacrifice for the good of weaker members of the church, so he used himself as an example to quell potential disagreement and criticism.

He begins by re-asserting his apostleship: he is an apostle, he has seen the Resurrected Christ, and he has served as an apostle to the Corinthians; in fact, they are the seal of his apostleship (9:1-2). Despite these noble credentials however, St. Paul sacrifices in very tangible ways: he does not receive food from the church (9:4); he does not have a wife (who would not only provide companionship, but would also receive support from churches) (9:5); and he does not receive any money from the church in Corinth (9:6). He then compares himself to people in common careers: is there a soldier, vineyard owner, or shepherd who is expected to bear the financial cost and physical burden of his work while not deriving any material benefit from it (9:7)? According to the Mosaic Law, even an ox must be unmuzzled while it treads grain (9:8-10; Deuteronomy 25:4), thereby allowing it to eat some of the grain.

Here is St. Paul’s point: he has the right to demand all of these things - as he says, it is no great thing to reap material things since he sows spiritual things (9:11) - but he refuses to use this right so that he does not hinder the gospel of Christ (9:12). Ambrosiaster explains, “Paul does not exercise his rights because they might be an obstacle to the gospel. That left him free to argue that he was not one of the false apostles.” Even though priests receive food from the temple (9:13), and the Lord Himself commanded that gospel preachers be supported for their work (9:14), St. Paul refuses any financial support so that no one can accuse him of preaching solely for material gain (9:15).

It should be noted that St. Paul sees no reason to boast about preaching the gospel of Christ: he is simply fulfilling the stewardship with which he’s been entrusted (9:17), and in fact, proclaims “woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” (9:16)! What, then, is his reward for this work? As Fr. Lawrence Farley answers, “For the sake of others, he refrains from doing what he otherwise would like to do. In this, St. Paul exercises a certain flexibility and indifference to his own rights and position. What matters is not his rights. What matters is gaining the more and winning men to Christ.” Significantly, St. Paul uses the freedom that his renunciation of his rights provides him to become a servant to all people - a Jew under the law to those under the law, and as one not under the law to those who are not under the law - so that by becoming all things to all people, he might save some (9:19-22).

Just think about this: St. Paul sacrifices himself so that he might share the blessings of the gospel with others (9:23)! As Origen notes, only someone mature in faith could do such a thing.

St. Paul now returns the focus of being self-sacrificing onto the Corinthian Christians by using the example of an athlete competing in a race or competing in a fight. Such a person lives a life of

temperance and self-sacrifice so that he or she might win the contest, and they do this for a mere “perishable crown” (9:26); St. Paul encourages the Corinthians to train and compete in such a way that each of them wins the imperishable crown of salvation (9:25, 26). As an example, St. Paul himself sacrifices diligently and with confidence so that he - even after preaching to others - does not become disqualified from winning the imperishable crown (9:26-27).