

1 Corinthians 9:15-18

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Paul preaches the gospel because Jesus has called him to. While he defends the right for ministers to be financially supported, he does not want payment. He preaches the gospel without charging people for it, out of voluntary obedience to Jesus. This supports his higher aim.

Paul has been addressing a challenge to his apostolic authority. Some have made the criticism that he does not rely upon monetary support to finance his ministry in the gospel. To this point, Paul has given an extensive defense of the practice where ministers of the gospel receive support for their ministry. He has argued this from a point of practicality, from provisions of the Law, and from the practice of the Levitical priests. But he now proclaims, *But I have used none of these things*. He has the right. He supports the practices. But he has abstained from exercising this right.

Paul then makes clear that he is not now setting himself up to start getting such support. He states, *And I am not writing these things so that it will be done so in my case*. He has not asserted the right to be supported. He is not asking for support now. Paul is not trying to lay a guilt trip on anyone. In fact, he makes a somewhat startling statement, saying *for it would be better for me to die than have any man make my boast an empty one*. The word translated *boast* can also be translated as “glory.” Paul will make clear that his goal is to win glory by gaining the great prize of Jesus’ approval for being faithful in running the race of life. Paul is being very careful to avoid having *any man* stand in his way, and making *empty his boast* of wanting to run the race of life in a manner to gain a great prize (verse 24). Paul will, in fact, die for the gospel (2 Timothy 4:6).

Paul now offers his internal logic, his own reasoning for why he has chosen to forgo his right to receive payment to support his ministry in the gospel. He will tell us that he believes doing so makes his ministry more effective. But first we will find out that he abstains from receiving financial support due to his own weakness. Paul does not want to risk abusing his authority, and losing his prize.

He states: *For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel*. Jesus called Paul to preach the gospel (Acts 9). Paul recognizes that Jesus is his Lord, and that if he disobeys his call, he is in big trouble. His own evaluation of his status if he refused to preach the gospel is this: *woe is me if I do not preach the gospel*. Paul made it clear earlier in this letter that he wants his work to matter for eternity (1 Corinthians 3:11-17). He knows his work can be like “wood, hay, straw” and burn up in the fire of the judgement of Jesus. He also knows that to whom much is given, much is expected (Luke 12:48). He understands that he will suffer great loss if he decides to *not preach the gospel*.

If he does *not preach the gospel*, Paul will be like the sons of the kingdom in the outer darkness, being omitted from the honor banquet when Jesus comes into His kingdom, while Gentiles who showed great faith are seated at the table of honor with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matthew

8:10-12). He made clear in chapter 3 that there would be great loss for those who did not properly steward their time on earth (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). Paul applies this principle to himself, and reckons that in his case, if he does not preach the gospel, he is going to suffer great loss. It is clear that he is looking well beyond this life. Working with his own hands, instead of raising financial support, does not make his life easier. Paul will make that explicit in verses 24-27.

Paul reasons that he greatly enhances his hope of reward from Christ by forgoing his right to financial support for his ministry. He says *For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward*. Paul spent considerable time defending the principle that ministers of the gospel should gain a present reward for their labor in the form of financial support, just as the soldier, farmer, or rancher. Each is spurred by hope of reward, in the form of financial support (1 Corinthians 9:7-12). But now Paul reasons he desires a much greater *reward* than mere financial support. He desires a *reward* from Jesus. And he reasons that the way to get a greater *reward* is to obey Jesus *voluntarily*. The word translated *voluntarily* can also be translated “willingly.” In context, the idea seems to be “enthusiastically” rather than begrudgingly.

Previously, Paul said he was *under compulsion* to preach the gospel. But it is clear here that this *compulsion* stems from his own evaluation of the risks and rewards of his decisions. Clearly he is aware that he has stewardship of the choice whether or not to follow Jesus’ command that he preach the gospel. He can decline to do so—Jesus has left him that power, the power to choose. But Paul evaluates the realities of what is at stake, and finds the answer to be clear and compelling. It is a “no-brainer” to obey Jesus. Paul is *under compulsion* due to the sheer realities of the cause-effect in play.

Paul recognizes that he could preach the gospel reluctantly. He states *but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me*. Paul could preach just enough to say, “I did what you asked,” and then he would discharge the *stewardship entrusted to him* by Jesus. He would have done his job. The result of just doing his job would be far better than the result of “woe is me” for refusing to preach the gospel. But Paul wants more than to just do the minimum.

When Jesus told the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, He indicated that if the servant receiving one talent would have just put it in the bank he would have done the minimum. Paul reasons that he could be like that. But Paul wants a greater *reward*. He believes that the greatest *reward* comes from obeying Jesus willingly. Paul is telling us his deepest motive, that he wants to win the greatest prize of life (verses 24-27). He now asks and answers the question “So what is in it for me?” Paul has declined financial support for ministering the gospel. For him, this refusal is a part of gaining a greater *reward*. A *reward* that stems from preaching the gospel *voluntarily*, or willingly. Paul has decided to work to provide his own sustenance to place himself into a mindset of willingness, that he might serve in obedience at a much greater level.

Paul asks the question that must underly the accusation and attack on his apostleship, and openly addresses his motive. He asks: *What then is my reward?* Paul does not try to pretend that he has no motive of self-interest. The Bible clearly recognizes that self-interest is something all humans seek. That is why the second greatest commandment tells humans to love others the same way they desire to be loved (Matthew 22:39). The presumption in this statement made by Jesus is that

we all naturally seek our own interest. Paul openly admits that he seeks his own interest. Paul now makes an extended explanation of his motive.

He begins to explain his motive by stating *That, when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.* Paul continues to explain that, for him, doing this places himself into a mindset that leads to a greater obedience, and a greater reward.

The phrase *make full use of my right in the gospel* is clearly connected with his decision to *offer the gospel without charge.* The phrase is rendered in some translations “not abuse my authority in the gospel.” It could be that Paul has sufficient self-knowledge to know that receiving funds from those to whom he ministers would become a stumbling block for him; it would stand in the way of ministering the gospel *voluntarily*, thus leading him to a greater *reward.*

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul noted teachers who were abusing their station as teachers, who “suppose that godliness is a means of gain” (1 Timothy 6:5). These teachers were actually not leading people to godliness, but rather to “disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions” (1 Timothy 6:4). It seems Paul here is saying “I don’t want to even allow myself to be placed in a position to be tempted to abuse my authority as a teacher of the gospel.”

Paul tells us he practices self-examination (1 Corinthians 4:4). He encourages others to practice self-examination to make sure they are not disqualified from winning the race of life, and receiving the greatest prize of life (2 Corinthians 13:5). Perhaps he knows himself, and wants to humble himself by paying his own way. He will soon tell us that he does not want to preach to others only to see himself be disqualified from winning the greatest of prizes (verse 27). It seems he believes that receiving financial support provides a risk, so he has decided to forgo that *right in the gospel.*

Paul will next tell us additional reasons why he has chosen to forego his *right in the gospel* to receive financial support—he believes it makes his ministry more effective. This, in turn, adds to the potential reward he seeks; a reward that lasts.

Biblical Text

¹⁵ But I have used none of these things. And I am not writing these things so that it will be done so in my case; for it would be better for me to die than have any man make my boast an empty one. ¹⁶ For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. ¹⁷ For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? That, when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.