

1 Corinthians 9:3-7

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/1cor/1cor-9/1-corinthians-93-7/>

Paul defends the right of apostles to be supported for their ministry work. Common sense shows that a soldier expects pay, a shepherd expects milk from his flock. Thus it is right that ministers of the gospel receive payment to keep their ministry going.

Now Paul turns to make a *defense to those who examine* him. He says his defense *is this*, then he makes a number of assertions. Each assertion infers a basic critique he is answering—the accusation by opponents that he is not a genuine apostle for the following reasons:

1. He pays his own way, rather than being paid to do the work, presumably by some human authority or institution and
2. He does not take along a wife as a part of his ministry team.

This is probably why he begins his defense with the rhetorical question *Am I not free?* Paul, like any good rhetorician, is going to turn a criticism into a point of support. Paul is under no obligation to do what he does, other than the obligation to his boss, who is Jesus Christ Himself. Paul is obligated to no human.

The basic criticism is inferred by this rhetorical question Paul asks: *Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working?* It seems Paul's opponents are making the argument that Paul is not a "real apostle" because he earns his own way rather than seeking support. *Barnabas* was Paul's companion on his first missionary journey, but he did not accompany Paul to Greece, where Corinth is located. Barnabas took John Mark and went on his own missionary journey, and Paul took Silas as a traveling companion on his second journey. Perhaps Barnabas was known to the Corinthian church, and had adopted Paul's custom of providing for himself out of his own work.

This passage tells us that there were a number of traveling missionaries, spreading the gospel of Jesus. This included *the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas*. *Cephas* is another name for the Apostle Peter. Paul seems to single him out since he was the head apostle. It appears that all of the apostles were traveling, as well as the *brothers of the Lord*. That the brothers of the Lord were spreading the gospel of Jesus is particularly amazing, since they did not believe in Him during His time of earthly ministry (John 7:5).

Apparently the custom of the traveling missionaries was to rely on financial supporters. This was also the practice of Jesus (Luke 8:2). But Paul decided to cover his own support by *working* to pay his own way. He will go on to explain his reasoning for doing so. Paul will not criticize those who rely on financial supporters. In fact, Paul asserts he has *a right to eat and drink*. From the context he is likely referring to a *right to eat and drink* at the expense of others. Further, he says he has a *right to take along a believing wife*, also at the expense of his financial supporters. He does not criticize others for having supporters, and states definitively that he has this right as well.

Paul goes on to defend the entire notion that those who serve the gospel ought to be supported by others. He asks *Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense?* Roman soldiers expected to be paid. Further, Paul asks *Who plants a vineyard and does not eat the fruit of it?* If a farmer goes to the expense of planting and harvesting grapes, he certainly expects to obtain the benefit from the fruit, either in the eating or the sale of the grapes. Further, Paul asks *Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock.* If a herdsman spends his time and energy tending a flock, he certainly expects to benefit from the milk and produce from the flock. Humans seek rewards for their efforts. That is simple reality.

This is the way of the world. Those who invest their time on behalf of others expect to benefit from their labor. In the same way, those who work on behalf of the gospel can expect to benefit from the sustenance of financial supporters, who are the “employers” of the work. In a sense, the missionaries are working for the church, so they should expect to have their food and drink provided. And it is a good investment for those who provide such support. Paul teaches this principle to the Galatians, telling them that they will reap what they sow, in the context of supporting those who minister for the gospel (Galatians 6:6-7). Jesus taught that those who financially support a prophet receive the same reward as the prophet (Matthew 10:41).

Paul will continue with this line of reasoning in the next section.

Biblical Text

³ My defense to those who examine me is this: ⁴ Do we not have a right to eat and drink? ⁵ Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶ Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working? ⁷ Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat the fruit of it? Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock?