

1 Corinthians 9:8-12a

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/1cor/1cor-9/1-corinthians-98-12a/>

Paul proves that not only common sense shows the right of ministers to be financially supported for their work, but the Old Testament Law illustrates this as well. Do not muzzle an ox while he works, so that he can eat and continue to work.

Paul continues to defend the principle that those who minister for the gospel have a right to be supported by others, although he will soon explain why he does not accept such support himself. In the prior verses, he spoke of common sense, noting that soldiers expect to be paid, and farmers and ranchers expect to gain the benefit from their labors. But Paul asserts that he is *not* merely *speaking these things according to human judgment*. Although this is an obvious principle of nature, it is also specifically prescribed in the Bible.

Paul asks rhetorically: *Or does not the Law also say these things?* The expected answer to this rhetorical question is “yes.” The Law does indeed include this principle. Paul notes that *it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing.”* Paul here quotes Deuteronomy 25:4, which literally concerns animal welfare. The ox who is doing the work of *threshing* grain from the harvest needs to eat a little of the harvest being threshed to gain needed energy to continue to work. In addition to neglecting the welfare of the ox, if the ox has a *muzzle* over his mouth, then he would not be able to eat as he works, and actually would do less work, which is bad management, and will result in lower profits.

But Paul asserts that God is really after a higher principle in this verse. He asks rhetorically, *God is not concerned about oxen, is He?* The answer to this rhetorical question is “no,” as Paul makes clear when he asks and answers another rhetorical question: *Or is He speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written.* Paul is teaching here that this provision of the law is actually aimed at humans, and teaches that it is foolish to withhold payment from employees. Just as the ox needs sustenance to work hard, so does a human employee. In the case of a missionary, if they have to spend time earning a living, they have less time to minister.

Paul continues to expound on the principle of not muzzling an ox while they work at threshing. He explains that it is wisdom to pay appropriate wages *because the plowman ought to plow in hope* that they will benefit from the fruit of their labor. With *hope* of reward from their work they will work harder. Like an ox with energy from eating, humans gain energy from *hope* of reward. Similarly, *the thresher* ought to be able to *thresh in hope of sharing the crops*. Threshing is done after the harvest, to separate out the fruit from the stalks. Those working at the harvest similarly ought to have *hope* of sharing from the benefit of the harvest. It’s just a fact that humans work harder when they have *hope* of a reward.

Paul then applies this principle from the Law, that oxen should not be muzzled as they work in threshing, and its application that humans should be rewarded for their labors by asserting that *If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?* Paul makes clear that, as an apostle, he has every right to be financially supported by the Corinthians. Paul

sowed spiritual things into the Corinthian church, so he has the right to *reap material things* from them, in the form of financial support. This is, again, consistent with nature, the Law, and the Levitical priesthood. Apparently others have begun to be supported financially by the Corinthians because Paul then asks, *If others share the right over you, do we not more?*

Perhaps those who are now gaining financial benefit from the Corinthian church are denigrating Paul's authority. They might be doing this thinking that Paul's influence with the Corinthian church is a threat to what is now their sustenance. Paul addressed this exact situation with the church at Philippi. Paul notes there were those who preached the gospel from "selfish ambition rather than from pure motives." Paul's response to this sad reality was that if "Christ is proclaimed" then "in this I rejoice" (Philippians 1:17-18).

It seems to be a similar case here with the Corinthian church, where Paul knows those ministering the gospel are jealous of him, and he refuses to rise in opposition to them, but rather seeks to rise above, and seek a higher plane. That is exactly what Paul goes on to explain, that the reward he is seeking is much greater than mere financial support. He wants to win the greatest prize of life, and for him, accepting financial support might get in his way.

So, while it is fine for others to seek financial support, and Paul fully endorses the principle, he has a higher aim. He is seeking a greater reward. He has *hope* of gain, but his *hope* is far greater and far higher than mere earthly finances. He will now go on to explain why he pays his own way, and why he appears to brush aside the jealousy of competing missionaries. But first he will make an additional affirmation of the principle that teachers of the gospel have the right to earn their living from the gospel, by referring to the Levitical priesthood.

Biblical Text

⁸ I am not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does not the Law also say these things? ⁹ For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing." God is not concerned about oxen, is He? ¹⁰ Or is He speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher to thresh in hope of sharing the crops. ¹¹ If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? ¹² If others share the right over you, do we not more?