

PREFACE

There are times when it seems a fairly straightforward process to get inside the apostle Paul's mind, to not just understand *what* he is saying, but *why*, and how he is thinking. I do not find this passage—indeed, most of Chapter Nine—to be one of those times.

- He uses up an extraordinary amount of ink making a case from which he is then going to divorce himself;
- Even within this he employs points that do not and will not apply to him: e.g., “a right to take along a believing wife”;
- Here and there he chooses words that, at least at first glance, seem inappropriate (or at least curious), such as the word “boast” in v15;
- One has the impression that the apostle's emotions may be getting the better of him, such as the abrupt break in the syntax of v15.

At such times perhaps the best plan of attack is to simply accept what Paul says, to find the “why” only from within the text itself, rather than trying to read between the lines. Come to think of it, that sounds like a profitable approach for just about *any* passage of Scripture.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:11-14.**v11**

If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?

Staying with his agricultural metaphors, Paul raises the issue of reciprocity specifically with the Corinthians. While ministering in Corinth, Paul will write a letter to the church in Rome. In our Chapter Fifteen of this letter he will speak of appropriate reciprocity, and gratitude, that should be an essential part of life in Christ.

Read Romans 15:26-27.

The pronouns in v27 leave it rather vague who is doing what for whom. The NIV (as it often does) inserts one word twice that helps clarify.

NIV 2011: They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.

So out of Jerusalem (“the Jews”), location of the first church, came missionaries to spread the gospel (“spiritual blessings”). In gratitude these converts, poor as they were, generously shared over and above what they could of their “material blessings” with “the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.” The word translated “material” in most of our versions—both here and in 1 Corinthians—is the Greek adjective *sarkikos* (from *sarx*) meaning fleshly, carnal. But here it doesn’t mean sinful, just “of this world.”

Sidebar: Let us not miss the fact that Paul speaks of an instance in which the poor were giving to the poor. As Jesus Himself pointed out (Luke 21:1-4), the poor are quite often more generous in their giving, relatively, than the rich.

Here in v11 Paul writes to the Corinthians what he wrote to the Romans while in Corinth: *We planted in you things of the Spirit; is it too much to ask that you respond with things of this world?*

v12A

If others share the right over you, do we not more?

Paul continues this same line in the first sentence of v12. Scholars have debated just who Paul refers to with “others.” He is probably *not* speaking of interlopers, such as the charismatic speakers and philosophers of the city (1 Corinthians 1:19, 2:5), those not due this right. We can’t say for sure who all ministered to the church in Corinth, but probably Paul is referring to Apollos and Peter (1 Corinthians 1:12).

Paul’s point is not that they were not due this right, but that they came later, after Paul had already “sown” the gospel in them.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-15.

Others may have come in to help teach the young church, but Paul, as it were, gave birth to the church as their spiritual father. As such he is due this right over them all the “more.”

v12B

Nevertheless, we did not use this right,

Then he once again touches lightly upon the point of this entire chapter—the point he will render with full force beginning in v15. He has been systematically making the case for these “rights” for the sole purpose of making his case for *not* using them.

but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.

One has to think that saying these words, “we endure all things,” to his amanuensis, Paul’s mind would roll back to all he had endured up till then for the sake of the gospel: plots to kill him, run out of town, jailed, stoned almost to death, beaten with rods, shipwrecked. Beyond that, however, he is specifically referencing the work he had to perform to support himself while on his journeys.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:6-9.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:11-13.

Why was he doing this? In Thessalonica it was to teach some in the church to stop being lazy and get back to work; in Corinth it was “so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.” But what does he mean by this?

Let’s first consider the word “endure” (NIV, “put up with”). Gordon Fee points out that “this is not Paul’s ordinary word for ‘endure’; here it seems not to mean ‘endure sufferings,’ but to put up with the kinds of hardships that working with one’s own hands and evangelizing at the same time would bring on.” So Paul here refers to the exhausting rigors of what we would call today the “bi-vocational” pastor or missionary.

Now let’s consider what he means by “so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.” He does not elucidate here, but he does in the final paragraph of the chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:18.

Paul’s intention was to drive home the free nature of the gospel by making it clear to the Corinthians that he was not in any way “selling” it to them—even to rejecting their “freewill” offerings and other forms of support. God offers salvation in Christ for free—one does not have to prove oneself worthy of it, or to work for it—so Paul illustrates this by working himself, instead of permitting the Corinthian church to support him while he is ministering to them.

We are then left with the question: Why did Paul think this was necessary? Were there others who *were* selling the gospel? The answer to this is yes. He mentions this in his second (extant) letter to the church.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:15-17.

And once again we have an instance of how the English translation of a word—here, “peddling”—while not inaccurate, just does not give us the full flavor of the original Greek.

peddling, corrupt^{kjv} = *kapeleuo* = from *kapelos* (a huckster); to retail, i.e. (by implication) to adulterate (figurative) :- corrupt. “The term included dealers in victuals and all sorts of wares, but was especially applied to retailers of wine, with whom adulteration and short measure were matters of course. Galen speaks of wine-dealers playing tricks with their wines; mixing the new, harsh wines, so as to make them pass for old” (M. R. Vincent). “Hence, the word comes to denote to adulterate; to corrupt, etc. It is here applied to those who adulterated or corrupted the pure word of God in any way, and for any purpose. It probably has particular reference to those who did it either by Judaizing opinions, or by the mixtures of a false and deceitful philosophy. The latter mode would be likely to prevail among the subtle and philosophizing Greeks. It is in such ways that the gospel has been usually corrupted” (Albert Barnes).

We all remember from Sunday School the story of Paul and Silas thrown in the Philippian jail during the second missionary journey. But we may not remember that the reason they were thrown in jail was that they had put a stop to what had been a profitable enterprise selling false religion.

Read Acts 16:16-19.

Paul did not want to give the Corinthians the slightest reason to think he might be one of these hucksters, these corrupters of the gospel.

Not only is there is nothing new under the sun, there are also some things that will never end this side of glory. If this earth reaches the year 2525 there will still be those trying to sell Christ’s gospel for profit. Today we have them, for the most part, on television screens. They are slick marketers, hucksters, selling new wine for old: they have twisted and corrupted Christ’s good news, replacing its profound depth with vaporous bromides, false promises denuded of their true cost—all the while making themselves rich.

Recognizing the cynicism of some in the Corinth church, and purposely setting himself apart from the charismatic charlatans that had already left their mark on the church, Paul intentionally set aside his rights as an apostle to make it clear to the Corinthians that Christ’s gospel is not a commodity that can be bought and sold, but is free to all who believe.