

**PREFACE**

For the last fourteen verses Paul has been systematically making the case for his rights as an apostle. In v11, drawing the human application from the OT illustration of the ox not being muzzled while threshing (v9), he states, "If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?" *Others have used this right; do we not have this right all the more?* But immediately, in the middle of v12, Paul, speaking of this one apostolic right, declares flatly, "We did not use this right." That is, none of those on his "team" (plural "we") availed themselves of this (one) right.

Now at the beginning of v15, Paul switches to first person singular (an emphatic "I"; now not speaking for all his associates or any others) and remains in that voice to the end of the chapter. He also switches to the plural "these things"—that is, he has used none of *all* his rights as an apostle.

**Read 1 Corinthians 9:15-18.**

Let me make two points before we dig into this next paragraph. First, a few commentators see a problem with Paul's statement, "I have used none of these things," or "I have not used any of these rights," citing what he writes in Philippians 4 to make the claim that Paul is being less than honest to the Corinthians.

**Read Philippians 4:14-18.**

**Note:** "I have received *pas...*" means "everything," or "all things"—*not* "full payment," as in NIVs and ESV, which makes it sound like a contractual obligation, rather than a gift.

Gordon Fee draws the distinction between occasional gifts (which the Philippians sent to Paul) and "patronage." Patronage, which the Corinthians were probably desiring with Paul, meant that the apostle would have been obligated to the church. Throughout history certain artists or musicians sought patrons to support them, to keep them sheltered and fed in exchange for painting or composing according to the patron's wishes. In the book of Judges is recorded an instance in which a Bethlehem Levite became a personal, in-house priest for a man named Micah during the time when "...there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever seemed right to him."

"Where do you come from?" Micah asked him. He answered him, "I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I'm going to stay wherever I can find a place."  
Micah replied, "Stay with me and be my father and priest, and I will give you four ounces of silver a year, along with your clothing and provisions." So the Levite went in and agreed to stay with the man, and the young man became like one of his sons. Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in Micah's house.  
Then Micah said, "Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, because a Levite has become my priest." (Judges 17:9-13 Christian Standard Bible)

Now, does anyone imagine that that priest said or did anything other than what Micah wanted? In our church we have benefit of a body at large and elders (the "patrons" paying the salaries of the pastoral staff) that have commissioned the pastors to declare from the pulpit the *whole* truth of Scripture, whether it hurts or not. But this is not necessarily the norm; Christendom is filled with churches that demand much less from a pastor. If the pastor takes issue with the situation, there is only one recourse for him: leave. If he stays, he is beholden to serve his patrons in the manner *they* deem appropriate—which may very well be an *abridged* gospel.

The apostle Paul would not permit this—with *any* church. He was called to preach the full, unabridged gospel, and this he could not do if he were the paid employee of a patron church. In this he had "used none of these things." We have evidence from the two Thessalonian letters, First Corinthians, and Acts that his day-to-day material support came from his own hands. This does not mean that he never received, nor did he fail to appreciate, the occasional gift.

The second point I want to make is, because the following arguments can get a little convoluted—Fee says, "One has the feeling that the argument got away from him a bit"—we need to be reminded that this passage, to the end of the chapter, paints a vivid and dramatic picture of Paul's "singular passion," for the gospel, and his unwavering commitment to deliver it undiluted—and free of any charge. His emphasis from here to the end of the chapter is defined by v23: "I do all things for the sake of the gospel."

v15

*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;*

We have already well-irrigated the verse's first sentence, so we needn't dwell on it. Paul quickly cautions that the church should not assume from all the previous arguments that they have been voiced to substantiate his claim on the rights now. In this and the next two verses he underscores this with five clauses, each beginning with "for" (which invariably means "explanation"—as if Paul is saying, "Here are 5 explanations about what I just said") :

- for it would be better for me to die than have any man make my boast an empty one.
- 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.
- For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me.

*for it would be better for me to die than have any man make my boast an empty one.*

In this first clause we have something interesting going on that is not visible in all our English translations. There is strong emotion behind this statement; literally in the Greek it is “For it is good for me rather to die than—” and then he abruptly stops his dictation. Instead of calming himself before completing the sentence, he explodes with, “No one will make my boast an empty one!”

**Sidebar:** We have an English word for this break in Paul’s thoughts and words that is a direct transliteration from the Greek: *aposiopesis*, which means “a sudden breaking off of a thought in the middle of a sentence, as if one were unable or unwilling to continue” (Webster’s).

The editors and translators, lacking knowledge of Paul’s thoughts and intentions for the completion of the first part, have simply joined it grammatically to the second part. It is possible that this how he meant to finish the first part, but it seems unlikely considering the break itself, and the vehemence with which the second part is delivered.

If we were to speculate on an ending for the first part ([and it could only be speculation](#)), considering the context of this chapter, as well as the immediate paragraph, we might finish it with (as does David Garland), “It is better for me rather to die than *to live off the gospel.*” For him to “sell” the good news of Christ would indeed nullify (make empty) “his prophetic calling and his reason for being.”

What we see revealed in the Greek of this verse is the humanity of our church fathers. It should comfort us to know that the disciples, the apostles, the missionaries that went out into the Jewish and Gentile world in the name of Christ were flesh and blood as ourselves, capable of great emotion in the delivering of the gospel message.

*...than have any man make my boast an empty one.*

It makes us a little uncomfortable to hear the apostle say something like this. We naturally think of “boasting” or “glorying” as a negative behavior, something one should not do—bad form, as it were. And we gain little consolation from the Greek.

The word, *kauchema* (*kow'-khay-mah*), means pretty much what we might think. Paul uses the word quite often, and more often than not in the negative, as he uses it in Chapter Five, when commenting on the Corinthians' acceptance of—and boasting about—a man sleeping with his father's wife.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 5:6-7.**

Yet here it is proposed as a good thing. The prophet Jeremiah (briefly quoted by Paul in Chapter One) gives us the word of the Lord on this business of boasting.

### **Read Jeremiah 9:23-24.**

*Gordon Fee:* When Paul uses it positively, his “boast” (or “glory”) is ordinarily in things that stand in contradiction to human “boasting/glorying” (Christ crucified, weaknesses, sufferings).

Thus we might say that what makes Paul's boasting acceptable is the ultimate object, or recipient of his boasting. In v1:31 he echoes the passage in Jeremiah: “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord,” and in v3:21, in reference to the divisions in the church over their various teachers (Paul, Apollos, Cephas), he commands, “So then let no one boast in men.” He is *not* saying here in v15, *Look at me! Aren't I something special for refusing your support?* Rather he is saying, as will come out in the following verses, *Look at what the Lord is accomplishing through even me, in my weakness. I will then boast in the privilege of serving Him.*

*John MacArthur:* Because it is frequently done in pride, boasting is usually a sin; but it need not be proud and sinful. Paul's boast was not intended to convey arrogance but joy. He was so glad for that spiritual privilege and commitment in which he rejoiced that he would rather die than contradict it. He had his priorities right, receiving his joy from exercising his privilege to restrict his freedoms rather than from using them.

If Paul's boast was to be made empty, or nullified, he may as well be dead, because everything he did, everything he was, was for the gospel of Christ: its furtherance, its effectiveness in saving those to whom he brought it. It was to this he was called—by Christ Jesus Himself; were that to end, what would be the point of living?