

## PREFACE

It is customary to study the details of a Scripture passage, then follow that with application. Today I would like to reverse that and begin with the application.

**Read 1 Corinthians 9:16-18.**

If you will permit me, I would like to claim the privilege of the teacher to reveal a personal application. Every follower of Christ is given by Him a gift, a skill—and accompanying marching orders. That is, every believer is given an ability, and then guidance—sometimes the “guidance” is administered with a 2x4—on how to use that ability for the kingdom of Christ. As Paul will delineate in Chapter Twelve, there are many different gifts: all are from God, all are necessary. One person’s gift is not necessarily superior to another’s; all are needed in the body of Christ

I take this opportunity, if you will indulge me, because in the passage before us I discover myself. Verses 16-18 comprise, in a sense, my biography in the Lord—not that I have the same *gift* as the apostle Paul, but that his calling from the Lord for the *employment* of that gift is the same as mine, and perhaps the same as yours (mine is in no way unique).

And to be clear: I did not read this and say to myself, “That’s a good idea. I think I’ll make this the pattern of my life.” No, rather *after* the Lord implemented it in my life, I discovered the same pattern, the same calling described here in His word in the life of Paul. Several biographical phrases leap out at me from this passage; my guess—and my hope—is that some of you will discover your own biography (or at least parts of it) here as well.

**“I am under compulsion” (v16)**

That which I do in the name of the Lord I *must* do. I have no choice. How do I know this?

**“woe is me if I do not” (v16)**

We discover our “compulsion” by a simple process: When we *do not* do it—when we purposely *stop* doing it—we are miserable. We feel it in our bones. We feel it in our spirit and heart. God through His Holy Spirit nags at us until we are back at it, and only then is our misery relieved.

**“a stewardship entrusted to me” (v17)**

Here is the key realization—and requisite *motivation*: Whatever the gift, God has selected you, He has selected me, specifically for the task. He has called each of us with a special gift and a special situation, and said, “Here. I entrust this to you.” This is our call, which will become, eventually, our “job description.”

***“What then is my reward?” (v18)***

Here is where we lose the world; this is the point at which the denizens of this earth just shake their heads in disbelief.

***“That...I may offer the gospel without charge” (v18)***

This is also where there is a demarcation within the body of Christ. Some are called (as Paul pointed out in vv7-11) to gain their living by their gifts. They put a roof over their heads, they pay their bills, they feed their family by means of the employment of their God-given gifts and calling (marching orders). So long as this is in obedience to the Lord’s call, it is an honorable and appropriate profession.

Others, however, are called to serve “without charge”—and I dare say, in varying degrees this applies to the majority of believers. In my own case I can weave my own biography into this passage:

For if I **write and teach**, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not **write and teach**. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me. What then is my reward? That, when I **serve the Lord with the gifts He has entrusted to me**, I may offer **these gifts without charge...** (substituted words)

Of course very often this realization—the understanding and apprehension of gifts and call—does not happen overnight. We may take a number of wrong turns before the Spirit gets us going in the right direction. This was the pattern, years ago, in my own situation. Whenever I sought recompense for employing my gifts, not only did it not work very well, I was always left feeling a bit queasy about the process, as if there was something *unseemly* about it. By contrast, whenever I gave away the product of my gifts, I felt much better about it and the Lord blessed the effort. Eventually the Spirit wielded His trusty 2x4 enough times to get it through my thick skull: Like Paul, I was to offer the products of my God-ordained gifts without charge. Period. Full stop.

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

**v16**

*For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion;*

The apostle cannot boast about anything in himself regarding his position because it is not based on personal choice. He is simply obeying the marching orders he received, personally, from Christ.

**compulsion** = *ananke* = from <G303> (ana) and the base of <G43> (agkale);

**constraint** (literal or figurative); by implication distress :- **distress**, must needs, (of) **necessity** (-sary), needeth, **needful**; **Garland**: “a pressing necessity”; **ESV**: “necessity is laid upon me.”

The prophet Jeremiah offers us a glimpse into the inner workings of such a God-driven compulsion.

### Read Jeremiah 20:8-9.

It is important that we keep this in mind: Paul had no choice, no vote in the matter. And not only this, he will hint at in the next verse, and state explicitly elsewhere ([Romans 6:15-22](#)), that he and all believers are literal slaves (or bond servants) to God. Slaves do not *choose* to do something; they are *told* to do something.

*for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.*

As in v15, there is a greater depth and emotion beneath the surface of this clause. “Woe is me” does not mean that he would experience some form of inner distress, or feel badly; there is an eschatological context for this. His life, his destiny is now divinely appointed; were he now to *not* preach the gospel, he would stand under divine judgment.

**Note:** Do you see how this helps clarify his use of the word “boast”? There is absolutely nothing about which he can *personally* boast—*Aren’t I a great guy for doing all this for free!*—since he is simply a slave obeying the orders of his Master. At the same time, however, this is not a picture of a hang-dog slave bemoaning his lot in life, preaching only because he is being forced to. To the contrary, his “woe” is not from preaching, but only comes into play if he *doesn’t*. The “compulsion” Paul speaks of is not arm-twisting obedience suffered under the rod; this compulsion is an inner fire, an unrelenting personal—yet divinely ordained—drive that he is helpless to resist—**and does not want to.**

v17

*For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me.*

Taken at face value, I find most of the translations of this verse less than satisfying:

NASB: voluntarily / against my will

NKJV: willingly / against my will

NIVs: voluntarily / not voluntarily

ESV: of my own will / not of my own will

It is not that the translations are inaccurate, but that the English words chosen leave an erroneous impression. Take the NKJV, for example: using “willingly” sounds like “OK, I’ll agree to do this,” and using “against my will” sounds like you’re doing it only because your arm is being twisted, or there is a gun to your head—neither of which represent what Paul is saying here. Probably the NIVs and ESV get the closest to expressing what Paul means, with the ESV the better of the two.

In the two parts of this verse the apostle is contrasting the free person to the slave, with himself being the slave. In the first part the person of free will (“of my own will”) decides to do something, or decides to take a job, and is thus due a wage. The word translated “reward” (*misthos*) means pay for service, wages. One does the work, one is due pay for that work from those for whom the work is done.

In the second part the slave, who works “not of [his] own will,” but of someone else’s (i.e., his master), does not make the decision himself, but does what he is told, and is not due a wage from those for whom the work is done. If the slave is to be paid at all, it will come from his master. The word translated “stewardship” refers to a slave who has been entrusted with a managerial responsibility, in a house or estate, such as Joseph was for Potiphar.

Paul’s point is that as an apostle and slave, he has been given the responsibility as a steward to bring gain to his Master—not to himself. Here is the picture:

*R. Horsley:* The royal officer or estate steward who has a commission does not get wages from the people he manages, or from the fields and laborers he supervises, but from the ruler or master he serves.

*David Garland:* Paul cannot receive a “reward” from the Corinthians, who are the field in which he plants. It can come only from the owner of the field, who commissioned him to plant.

And in none of this is Paul “under the gun,” so to speak. None of this implies an unwillingness on his part.

v18

*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.*

Here’s where we lose the denizens of this world. We expect Paul to reference his future rewards in heaven, but he does not even do that. No, his reward—his wage, his salary—is the privilege of offering the gospel without charge—the free gospel offered for free! The reason? So that he will not misuse what is rightfully his in the gospel.

## CONCLUSION

Let me close by illustrating this for today’s culture—just one example of how it *can* be done. How might this translate into our present culture? We live in a connected and interconnected society; our “relationships” would be diagrammed like an intricate, dense spider web: one connection leading to several, and each of those connected to a multitude of more connections. An integral part of these myriad connections are *dependencies*. One modern example of this would be Facebook.

Facebook is a perfect example of today's interconnectivity, but it relies upon one fragile dependency: Facebook itself. If you have established a presence on Facebook—something more than just a personal “here's what I am up to” site for friends and family—you are beholden to the powers that be at Facebook—especially if you are a conservative Christian. At a whim, and in the blink of an eye, they can shut you down and turn you off. Everything you have invested in establishing that presence can be turned off like flipping off a light.

This is what Paul was determined to avoid with the Corinthians. He was not ultimately serving them, but the Lord God, and the gospel of Christ. He could not risk being beholden to any one church, but must remain free to serve all—as well as free to do it for free.

Thinking in terms of “ministry,” what is the online equivalent to the sort of independence Paul needed? Instead of using Facebook you have an independent web site where there are no anonymous pinheads ready to shut you down because they disagree with your doctrine or theology. At my web site there are

- no ads;
- no begging for money;
- no encouraging the visitor to contribute to the site's upkeep;
- no cross-links to other sites;
- no, you scratch our back, and we'll scratch yours.

My web site is simply a repository for my work, where everyone and anyone can obtain whatever they like free of charge.

This is how the apostle Paul worked: he was free to do it for free. And his reward? The privilege—and joy—of giving it all away in service to his Master.