

How to Be a Successful Christian Servant

1 Corinthians 9:15-27

1 Corinthians 9:15-27: *“But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void. **16** For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! **17** For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship. **18** What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel. **19** For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; **20** and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; **21** to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; **22** to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. **23** Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you. **24** Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. **25** And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. **26** Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. **27** But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”*

Background Notes

In the first half of this chapter Paul belabored the point that Christian workers have the right to receive financial remuneration for their service in the Lord's work. He used a number of arguments - from nature, logic and Old Testament Scripture - to prove his point.

In verse 14 Paul gave his “closing argument” by saying that the Lord Himself stated that laborers have the right to receive financial remuneration: *“Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.”* Paul was referring to our Lord's statement recorded in Matthew 10:10 and Luke 10:7 where He said, *“The laborer is worthy of his wages.”* Paul certainly made his case that the Lord's servants have the right to receive financial support for their service in the Lord's work.

However, at the same time, Paul also argued that servants of the Lord are not required to take financial remuneration for their Christian service. They can give up this right. In fact, Paul had not used his right to financial support when ministering to the Corinthians - so that no questions could ever be raised about his true motives for preaching the gospel. Verse 12: *“If others are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more? Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ.”* We know that Paul made tents to support himself rather than depending on financial support from those to whom he was ministering, even though it was his *right* to receive financial remuneration.

It seems that the false teachers at Corinth, who were undermining Paul's apostolic authority, tried to turn this good gesture on Paul's part into an argument against his claim of apostolic authority. They were saying things like, "If Paul was a true apostle, he wouldn't be making tents for a living. If he were an apostle, he would be receiving money for his services from the church." Just as they (the false teachers) were receiving money from the church! Read 2 Corinthians 12 also in this connection.

In fact, Paul said, *"I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing"* (v11). "Most eminent apostles" here are the teachers at Corinth to whom Paul was referring - with irony! They were receiving financial remuneration for their services and at the same time, they were undermining the apostolic authority of the apostle Paul! Verse 12: *"Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong!"* Again, note the irony.

Now verse 14: *"Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved. But be that as it may, I did not burden you."*

So in the second half of 1 Corinthians 9 Paul refuted such thinking, and showed that to restrict oneself and give up one's rights is more honorable in the ministry. In fact, Paul showed three areas of the Christian life – areas that he followed, but the false teachers did not follow. This is the Word of God concerning Christian practice that Paul was writing. Christian servants (then and today) should follow these apostolic practices in order to be scriptural and successful Christian servants.

Doctrinal Points

1. Christian servants should practice self-denial.

This area of Christian living is covered in verses 15-18. When Paul said that he "used none of these things"(v15), he meant that he did not use his right to financial support from the Corinthians. He didn't take advantage of any of the obligations that the Corinthians owed him for his ministry among them. And Paul assured them that he wasn't bringing this matter up to remind them of their responsibility (v15). No, he would rather die than do that! He was going to preach the gospel regardless of any financial support because (1) there is eternal reward from the Lord and (2) he was obligated before the Lord to preach the gospel. This is part of the stewardship of the Lord that has been entrusted to him.

So Paul gave up his rights and practiced self-denial so he could offer the gospel free of charge, without anyone saying that he was "in it for the money," or for "what he could get out of it." Verse 18: *"What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel."*

What an example for Christian servants today! It's great to be in a position where no one can say "He/she is in the ministry for the money!"

It's great to be able to say that I've never taken any remuneration from the Growing Christians Ministries funds. It would not be wrong for me to take a salary from these funds, but because I have given up this right, no one can raise questions about my motives or the goals of the ministry. Christian servants should practice self-denial.

2. Christian servants should practice accommodation.

Verses 19-23: *"For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as^{fit} weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you."*

Notice that the doctrinal point is not "Christian servants should practice compromise," but "Christian servants should practice **accommodation**." In this context, "accommodation" means to *adapt* and *adjust* to various situations, but *without compromise*. This is what Paul did when he shared the gospel. Verse 19: *"For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more."*

As a Christian, Paul was free from the Old Testament Law, but when he witnessed to Jews, he didn't flaunt his Christian liberty (v20). He refrained from eating pork, and he refrained from working on the Sabbath, for example.

On the other hand when he witnessed to Gentiles, he did not practice the restrictions of the Jewish Law, because he was free from the Law (v21). Not free from God's *moral* laws, because God's moral laws never change - they continue in the law of Christ. But Paul was free from the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament Mosaic Law.

So in verse 22, when Paul said that he "became all things to all men in order that he might win some," he didn't mean that he became a thief in order to witness to bank robbers! He didn't become a homosexual to witness to the gay community. No!

Accommodation does not involve compromise with the moral laws of God, in any way! It is not the same as the expression "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." But it does involve adapting, and adjusting, and being flexible in order to relate to and communicate with different people in different situations and cultures. Remember, the disciples had a hard time accommodating to the Samaritans – but the Lord Jesus accommodated. He was able to relate to and witness to the Samaritan woman.

Do you find it hard to accommodate? Are you so set in your ways that you cannot flex enough to relate and communicate with people outside your comfort zone? Christian servants should practice accommodation.

3. Christian servants should practice self-discipline.

Verses 24-27: *Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified* [disqualified as a Christian servant, not disqualified as a Christian].

In these verses Paul was referring to the Greek games that were held not too far from Corinth. Everyone knew that when athletes don't practice self-discipline, both in training and in the contest, they will not be winners. Do you want to be a winner as a Christian servant? Then practice self-discipline!

In verse 27 Paul said that he "beats his body." This does not mean that he would literally beat himself with a baseball bat or a whip. No, the idea is not self-flagellation, but **self-discipline**. We must discipline ourselves as to the use of our time, money, and leisure.

It takes discipline to study the Bible, and pray, and have family devotions, and give money, and faithfully serve the Lord. We've said it often – "**you don't drift into godliness.**" Godliness requires self-discipline.

Practical Application

Let's earn the right to be heard!

Have you ever heard that expression? When we practice these three areas of Christian living - self-denial, accommodation, and self-discipline - we will find that no one will be able to say, "You're in it for the money," or "You don't really care," or "You're not really sincere." No. People will at least give you a hearing, because you've earned the right to be heard.

Too often when unbelievers look at our lifestyle, unfortunately they're able to say, "How are you any different from all the other Christian hypocrites I've met?"

Practice the three areas of our doctrinal points – self-denial, accommodation, and self-discipline – and they won't be able to say that. You will have earned the right to be heard. Let's earn the right to be heard!