SMITH FOR CHRIST PUBLISHING · BEREAN DASHBOARD STUDY

1 Corinthians 9

Free from All, Slave to All — O·I·A, integrated with the Deep Dive

OBSERVATION · INTERPRETATION · APPLICATION · 2026-11-15 · NASB 1995

"Seeking God diligently — examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." — Acts 17:11

CHAPTER THEME

Freedom in Christ is not the right to do what I want; it is the freedom to lay down what I'm entitled to so others can hear the gospel. That takes a servant's heart and an athlete's discipline.

00 The Text

1 CORINTHIANS 9 (NASB95), MARKED

HOW THIS STUDY IS MARKED — God — His character & actions · Command / instruction · Key repeated word · Sin / warning · Promise / blessing · Time / place / contrast

1 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?
Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?

2 If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

3 My defense to those who examine me is this:

4 Do we not have a right to eat and drink?

5 Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?

6 Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working?

7 Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat the fruit of it? Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock?

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? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.

13 Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar?

14 So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.

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

16 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.

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

18 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.

19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.

20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law;

21 to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law.

22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.

23 I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.

25 Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

26 Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air;

27 but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

Marked in the text

- **v1** “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” — God — His character & actions
- **v2** “the seal of my apostleship” — Promise / blessing
- **v9** “YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING” — Command / instruction
- **v10** “plow in hope” — Promise / blessing
- **v12** “we did not use this right” — Time / place / contrast
- **v12** “cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ” — Sin / warning
- **v14** “the Lord directed” — God — His character & actions
- **v14** “get their living from the gospel” — Command / instruction
- **v16** “woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” — Sin / warning
- **v17** “a stewardship entrusted to me” — God — His character & actions
- **v18** “without charge” — Promise / blessing
- **v19** “I have made myself a slave to all” — Command / instruction
- **v21** “under the law of Christ” — Time / place / contrast
- **v22** “all things to all men” — Time / place / contrast
- **v22** “save some” — Promise / blessing
- **v24** “only one receives the prize” — Time / place / contrast
- **v24** “Run in such a way that you may win” — Command / instruction
- **v25** “exercises self-control in all things” — Command / instruction
- **v25** “a perishable wreath” — Time / place / contrast
- **v25** “an imperishable” — Promise / blessing
- **v27** “I discipline my body and make it my slave” — Command / instruction
- **v27** “disqualified” — Sin / warning
- **v1** “free” — Key repeated word (every occurrence)
- **v4** “right” — Key repeated word (every occurrence)
- **v12** “gospel” — Key repeated word (every occurrence)
- **v19** “win” — Key repeated word (every occurrence)

01 Observation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

KEY VERSE · 1 CORINTHIANS 9:12

"If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ."

FIGURE · WHERE CHAPTER 9 SITS



Chapter 9 is the hinge of Paul's answer about idol food: the liberty of 8:9 is the same "right" Paul proves and then refuses in chapter 9.

Setting. Paul writes from Ephesus (16:8) to the church he planted in Corinth, a wealthy port city that hosted the Isthmian Games every two years. Chapter 9 sits in the middle of his answer about food offered to idols (chs. 8–10). In chapter 8 he asked the "strong" to give up a right for a weaker brother's sake (8:9, 13); chapter 9 is Paul showing them he does exactly that himself — while answering some at Corinth who doubted he was a real apostle.

Who: Paul; Barnabas (v6); "the rest of the apostles," "the brothers of the Lord," and Cephas (v5); the Corinthians ("my work in the Lord," v1); "those who examine me" (v3); Jews; those under the Law; those without law; the weak (vv20–22); runners and boxers (vv24–26).

Structure:

- vv1–2 — **credentials:** Am I not free? an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? You are the seal of my apostleship.
- vv3–6 — **the rights:** to eat and drink, to take along a believing wife, to refrain from working.

- vv7–14 — **the case for support:** soldier, vineyard, flock (v7); the Law of Moses — "You shall not muzzle the ox" (vv8–10, Deut 25:4); spiritual seed, material harvest (v11); others share the right (v12a); the temple and the altar (v13); "the Lord directed" (v14). In the middle: "Nevertheless, we did not use this right … so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ" (v12b).
- vv15–18 — **the refusal and the reward:** I have used none of these things; preaching is compulsion — "woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" (v16); my reward is to offer the gospel without charge (v18).
- vv19–23 — **free, but a slave to all:** to Jews as a Jew, to those under the Law as under the Law, to those without law as without law (yet under the law of Christ), to the weak weak — "all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some" (v22).
- vv24–27 — **the athlete:** run to win; self-control in all things; a perishable wreath vs. an imperishable; not without aim, not beating the air; "I discipline my body and make it my slave," so that I will not be disqualified (v27).

Repeated words, with counts:

- "gospel" ×9 — vv12, 14 (×2), 16 (×2), 18 (×3), 23.
- "right" ×6 — vv4, 5, 6, 12 (×2), 18 (Greek *exousia*; KJV "power").
- "win" ×6 — vv19, 20 (×2), 21, 22, 24 (the first five *kerdainō*, "gain"; v24 a different verb).
- "law / Law" ×11 — vv8, 9, 20 (×4), 21 (×5).
- "all" ×9 — vv12, 19 (×2), 22 (×3), 23, 24, 25; "all things" ×4 — vv12, 22, 23, 25.
- "so that" ×9 — vv12, 15, 19, 20 (×2), 21, 22, 23, 27 — Paul's purpose clauses.
- "Lord" ×5 — vv1 (×2), 2, 5, 14.
- "apostle / apostleship / apostles" ×4 — vv1, 2 (×2), 5.
- "run" ×4 — vv24 (×3), 26.
- "preach / proclaim / preached" ×5 — vv14, 16 (×2), 18, 27.
- "eat" ×3 — vv4, 7, 13; "weak" ×3 — v22; "Jew / Jews" ×3 — v20.
- "free" ×2 — vv1, 19 (the chapter's bookends); "slave" ×2 — vv19, 27; "reward" ×2 — vv17, 18; "boast" ×2 — vv15, 16; "hope" ×2 — v10.
- Question marks ×19 — seventeen in vv1–13, then vv18 and 24. He argues like a man on trial.

Contrasts: a right ⟷ refusing to use it (vv12, 15). Spiritual things sown ⟷ material things reaped (v11). Voluntarily ⟷ against my will (v17). Free from all ⟷ a slave to all (v19). Under the Law ⟷ without law ⟷ under the law of Christ (vv20–21). All run ⟷ only one receives the prize (v24). A perishable wreath ⟷ an imperishable (v25). Preaching to others ⟷ being disqualified myself (v27).

Lists: soldier / vinedresser / shepherd (v7); eat and drink / a believing wife / refrain from working (vv4–6); Jews / under the Law / without law / weak (vv20–22).

Shape of the chapter: a trial (1–6), a case proved (7–14), a right refused (15–18), a freedom spent (19–23), a race run (24–27). It opens with "Am I not free?" and turns on "Nevertheless."

Chapter theme (my words): Paul had every right a minister can have, proved it from life, Law and the Lord's own word — and laid it all down so nothing would hinder the gospel. Freedom in Christ is spent on others, and it takes an athlete's discipline to keep spending it.

02 Interpretation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?

KEY VERSE · 1 CORINTHIANS 9:16

"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."

FIGURE · FREE FROM ALL, SLAVE TO ALL

FREE FROM ALL MEN → A SLAVE TO ALL (v19)

one goal repeated five times: "so that I might win"

TO THE JEWS	UNDER THE LAW	WITHOUT LAW	THE WEAK
I BECAME as a Jew	I BECAME as under the Law	I BECAME as without law	I BECAME weak
FOR EXAMPLE Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3)	FOR EXAMPLE a purification vow (Acts 21:23–26)	FOR EXAMPLE no Levitical customs among Gentiles	FOR EXAMPLE "I will never eat meat again" (8:13)
to win them	*to win them*	*to win them*	*to win them*

WHAT FLEXED: CUSTOMS · DIET · MANNER · APPROACH

WHAT NEVER MOVED

"not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ" (v21) · "Christ crucified" (1:23)

Paul's conduct bent toward every group he wanted to reach; the gold bar is what never bent — the law of Christ and the message of the cross.

FIGURE · THE ATHLETE AND THE CHRISTIAN

1 COR 9:24–27	AT THE ISTHMIAN GAMES	IN THE CHRISTIAN RACE
HOW MANY WIN	only one receives the prize (v24)	"Run … that you may win" — Henry: "You may all run so as to obtain"
THE TRAINING	self-control in all things; ten months of strict training	give up even good things — like idol meat (8:13)
THE WREATH	perishable — a crown of leaves that withers (v25)	imperishable — "the unfading crown of glory" (1 Pet 5:4)
THE AIM	a runner off course, a boxer beating the air (v26)	every stride and every blow aimed at the finish
THE BODY	trained into shape for a day's glory	"I discipline my body and make it my slave" (v27)
THE VERDICT	the umpire rejects: adokimos, "disqualified"	the herald who must keep the rules he announced (v27)

Read across each row: Paul borrows every part of the Isthmian contest — the odds, the training, the wreath, the aim, the body, the verdict — and raises the stakes.

Why chapter 9 is here. All four of our teachers tie it to chapter 8. Guzik: the Corinthians claimed a "right" based on "knowledge" to eat in idol temples, so Paul shows them a man with far bigger rights who let them go. The word Paul keeps using — *exousia*, "right" — is the very word of 8:9, "this liberty of yours." Henry calls Paul "a remarkable example of that self-denial" he had just commended.

Was Paul really an apostle (vv1–2)? Some at Corinth doubted it. Sproul explains why the question was serious: the others had been among the Twelve and eyewitnesses; Paul was neither. But "to be qualified to be an Apostle, one must have been called directly by Christ," and Saul received that call on the Damascus road. Guzik adds that seeing Jesus alone does not make an apostle — Paul was commissioned (Acts 26:12–18) — and that the church itself was the proof: "The proof is in the pudding."

Is Paul allegorizing the ox (vv8–10)? No. Guzik, quoting Calvin, rejects turning "the whole of Scripture into an amusing game." Deuteronomy 25:4 was a real, humane law for a real animal, but the principle behind it — the worker shares in what his work produces — reaches further, and Paul applies it "for our sake." Wiersbe (in Guzik): "Since oxen cannot read, this verse was not written for them." Paul quotes the same verse beside Jesus' "the laborer is worthy of his wages" in 1 Timothy 5:18.

Should ministers be paid? Paul says yes — "the Lord directed" it (v14; Luke 10:7). Henry: a minister "may waive his right, as Paul did, without being a sinner; but those transgress an appointment of Christ who deny or withhold it."

Guzik: take it or decline it, whichever serves the gospel — but if you take it, "work hard to earn that money." Paul refused it at Corinth, not everywhere (he received gifts from Philippi, Phil 4:15–16).

Compulsion and reward (vv15–18). Preaching was not Paul's gift to God; it was his duty — *anankē*, necessity laid on him. A steward (*oikonomia*) gets no bonus for doing his job. So the only "reward" left was to preach without charge. Spurgeon: "He who preaches best feels that he preaches worst." Henry: "Leave the heart out of our duties, and God abhors them." Sproul helps here: "call" in the New Testament can mean the gospel call to all, the effectual call to salvation, or a vocational call to "a particular task, or a particular ministry." Paul's compulsion is the third kind, laid on him with unusual force.

"All things to all men" — compromise or love (vv19–23)? Not compromise of the message. Guzik (with Gordon Fee): this "has to do with how one lives or behaves among those whom he wishes to evangelize," not adapting the gospel. Spurgeon: "there was never a man more stern for principle than Paul." Henry: "by all means" means "all lawful means"; "He would not sin against God to save the soul of his neighbour." Sproul draws the hard line: Paul circumcised Timothy as a matter of indifference (Acts 16:3), but when the Judaizers made it necessary, he resisted them "with the full force of his Apostleship" (Gal 2:3–5). The weak brother may limit my liberty; he may not make laws for the church. Paul was never "without law" — he was "under the law of Christ" (v21).

The athlete (vv24–27). Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games; Guzik says athletes had to train ten months before they were allowed in. The point for Corinth: athletes give up *good* things to win, so a Christian can give up idol meat. "I discipline my body" (*hypōpiazō*) is a boxer's word — a black eye. Guzik is careful: the body is not evil (6:19–20), and the flagellants who whipped themselves misread this verse. Henry: "The body must be made to serve the mind, not suffered to lord over it."

What does "disqualified" mean (v27)? — where our teachers differ. Guzik: "probably doesn't refer to the loss of salvation … but the loss of reward," as a losing athlete kept his citizenship. Henry reads it more soberly: "A preacher of salvation may yet miss it. He may show others the way to heaven, and never get thither himself" — and holy fear is the guard against it. Sproul names this verse as one some Protestants use to argue salvation can be lost, and answers that God finishes what He begins, and that those who depart from the faith were never really believers. Spurgeon: "Paul was not afraid of being cast away by God at the last." The same word, *adokimos*, appears in 2 Cor 13:5 ("test yourselves … unless indeed you fail the test"). I want my men to see both readings — loss of reward, or the warning that a profession without perseverance proves false — and to land where all four agree: Paul took the danger seriously enough to train.

Word study (Greek):

- **free — *eleutheros* (G1658):** not a slave; vv1 and 19 frame the chapter.
- **seal — *sphragis* (G4973):** the stamp that proves a document genuine; the Corinthians are Paul's (v2).
- **defense — *apologia* (G627):** a legal reply; **examine — *anakrinō* (G350):** to cross-examine at a hearing (v3).
- **right — *exousia* (G1849):** authority, right — six times (vv4, 5, 6, 12×2, 18); the "liberty" of 8:9.
- **muzzle — *phimoō* (G5392):** to muzzle or silence (SBLGNT reads the synonym *kēmoō* in v9; 1 Tim 5:18 has *phimoō*).
- **hindrance — *enkopē* (G1464):** a cutting-in, a trench across the road; only here (v12).
- **endure — *stegō* (G4722):** to bear up under; the same verb as love that "bears all things" (13:7).
- **directed — *diatassō* (G1299):** to give an order; the Lord commanded it (v14).
- **boast — *kauchēma* (G2745):** ground of glorying (vv15, 16).

- **compulsion — *anankē* (G318):** necessity laid on a man (v16).
- **stewardship — *oikonomia* (G3622):** a household manager's trust (v17).
- **without charge — *adapanos* (G77):** costless; only here (v18).
- **made myself a slave — *douloō* (G1402):** voluntary slavery (v19).
- **win — *kerdainō* (G2770):** a merchant's "gain" — five times in vv19–22.
- **under the law of Christ — *ennomos* (G1772):** within the law, bound to Christ (v21).
- **fellow partaker — *synkoinōnos* (G4791):** a co-sharer in the gospel (v23).
- **prize — *brabeion* (G1017):** the umpire's award (v24; Phil 3:14).
- **compete — *agōnizomai* (G75):** to strain in a contest (v25).
- **self-control — *enkrateuomai* (G1467):** mastery of self "in all things"; only 7:9 and 9:25.
- **wreath — *stephanos* (G4735):** the victor's crown of leaves; **perishable — *phthartos* (G5349); imperishable — *aphthartos* (G862).**
- **without aim — *adēlōs* (G84):** uncertainly; only here (v26); **box — *pykteuō* (G4438):** only here.
- **discipline — *hypōpiazō* (G5299):** to strike under the eye (v27; Luke 18:5).
- **make my slave — *doulagōgeō* (G1396):** to lead about as a slave; only here.
- **disqualified — *adokimos* (G96):** rejected after testing (Rom 1:28; 2 Cor 13:5–7; Titus 1:16).

Key insights to carry (from the Deep Dive):

1. **Chapter 9 is chapter 8 lived out** — the "right" Paul refuses is the Corinthians' "liberty" of 8:9.
2. **Nineteen questions, then one "nevertheless"** (v12).
3. **Proving a right is not the same as using it** — Henry: the man who shows "a generous disregard to his own" pleads best for others.
4. **Don't cut a trench across the gospel's road** — *enkopē*, "hindrance," only here.
5. **A steward gets no bonus for doing his job** — preaching was compulsion; preaching free was the gift.
6. **Flex the conduct, never the message** (Guzik, with Fee).
7. **The weak brother may limit me, but he may not legislate for the church** (Sproul).
8. **"Win" is a merchant's word** — and the profit is people.
9. **Train, don't just try** — self-control in all things.
10. **The herald must run the race he announces** (v27).

Cross-references: Num 18:8–24; Deut 25:4; Matt 10:10; Mark 10:45; Luke 9:5; 10:7–8; Acts 9:1–19; 16:3; 18:1–3; 20:33–35; 21:23–26; 26:12–18; Rom 4:11; 1 Cor 1:22–23; 4:12; 6:19–20; 8:9–13; 10:12, 23–33; 11:1; 13:7; 15:8; 2 Cor 11:7–9; 13:5; Gal 2:3–5; 5:23; Phil 3:12–14; 4:15–16; 2 Thess 3:7–9; 1 Tim 5:17–18; 2 Tim 2:5; 4:7–8; Heb 12:1–2; 1 Pet 1:4; 5:4; 1 John 2:19.

03 Application

HOW DOES IT CHANGE ME?

KEY VERSE · 1 CORINTHIANS 9:27

"but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified."

FIGURE · SIX REASONS AND ONE NEVERTHELESS



The right is proved six ways — and laid down in one word.

Read down the left column — Paul builds his case for support six ways — then see the single word that sets it all aside for the gospel.

Command to obey — lay down a right for someone else. Paul had every right to a salary, a wife on the road, a meal on the church's tab — and he set them all aside "so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ" (v12). What am I clinging to as "my right" that is getting in the way of somebody hearing the gospel from me? My time, my comfort, my opinions, even my freedom in gray areas? This week I'll name one and lay it down.

Example to follow — free, but a servant. "Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all" (v19). That is Jesus' own pattern: He "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45). In the men's ministry, it means meeting a man where he is — in recovery, in prison, just out — sitting at his table, learning his language, without ever changing the message to get there. Adjust my approach; never adjust the gospel.

Sin to confess — keeping score on what I'm owed. I confess the times I've served and then quietly kept a ledger: the thank-you I didn't get, the recognition someone else got, the help I gave that nobody repaid. Paul said his reward was to give the gospel away free (v18). I don't have to collect.

Promise to trust — an imperishable wreath. The Isthmian wreath wilted in a week. The crown Christ gives does not fade (v25; 1 Pet 5:4). When the work feels unseen and unpaid, I remember that Paul chose unpaid on purpose, and that the Chief Shepherd keeps the books.

For the men I walk with — train, don't just try. "Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things" (v25). Nobody wins a race by deciding on race day. Recovery, purity and sobriety are won in the daily, boring disciplines: the morning in the Word, the phone call to a brother, the plan for the hard hour, the boundaries set before the temptation shows up. Paul didn't say "I try harder"; he said "I discipline my body and make it my slave" — the body serves; it doesn't rule. And I don't do it to pay for sin; Jesus paid that in full.

Warning to heed — preaching to others is not the same as running myself. "So that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified" (v27). That one is for me as a teacher and editor of studies like this one. It's possible to help others run and stop running myself. Lord, keep me in the race I teach about.

Questions for the table (from the Deep Dive):

1. What "right" am I holding onto — time, money, comfort, a gray-area freedom — that may be cutting a trench across someone else's road to Christ? (9:12; 8:9, 13) *Paul proved his right six ways and laid it down in one word: "nevertheless."*
2. Do I support the men and women who feed me spiritually? What would it look like to stop "muzzling the ox" in my church? (9:7–14; 1 Tim 5:18) *Henry: those who withhold support "transgress an appointment of Christ."*
3. Is there anything in my life I do for Christ that I could not stop doing if I tried — a "woe is me" calling? (9:16–18) *A steward does not ask for a bonus; his joy is in giving what was not required.*
4. Who is the man I am least like at this table or on the yard — and what would it cost me to "become as" him without changing the gospel? (9:19–23; 1:23) *Conduct flexes; the law of Christ and "Christ crucified" do not.*
5. What daily, boring discipline is my recovery or my walk actually riding on right now — and where am I just "beating the air"? (9:24–26; Gal 5:23) *Nobody wins a race by deciding on race day.*
6. Paul feared being disqualified after preaching to others. Where am I helping other men run while I have stopped running myself? (9:27; 2 Cor 13:5) *The herald must keep the rules he announces.*

Worship. Jesus had every right in heaven and laid it down — He became a servant to all, He became weak with the weak, He was counted among the lawless, so that He might save some. Everything Paul did in this chapter he learned at the cross. The One who ran the whole course without a misstep now holds out a crown that will never wither.

Prayer. Lord Jesus, You laid down every right for me. Make me willing to lay down mine for others. Keep the gospel I share unhindered by my preferences, my pride or my wallet. Give me — and the men I serve — the self-control of a trained runner, so that we run to win and finish the race, and don't let me preach to others and stop running myself. Amen.

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