

⁷What soldier ever serves at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat some of its fruit? Or who takes care of a flock and does not drink milk from the flock? ⁸Am I saying this just from a human point of view? Doesn't the law also say this? ⁹Yes, it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out grain." Is God really concerned about oxen, ¹⁰or does he say this entirely for our sake? Yes, it was written for our sake, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher ought to thresh in hope of getting a share. ¹¹If we sowed spiritual seed for your good, is it too much if we reap material benefits from you? ¹²If others have some right to make this claim on you, don't we even more? But we did not use this right. Instead, we endure everything so as not to cause any hindrance for the gospel of Christ.

¹⁹In fact, although I am free from all, I enslaved myself to all so that I might gain many more. ²⁰To the Jews, I became like a Jew so that I might gain Jews. To those who are under the law, I became like a person under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those who are under the law. ²¹To those who are without the law, I became like a person without the law (though I am not without God's law but am within the law of Christ) so that I might gain those who are without the law. ²²To the weak, I became weak so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least some. ²³And I do everything for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in it along with others.

Today we wrestle with the question: "What does freedom have to do with love?" On the surface, we might think that it's not a whole lot. But as Paul shows us, freedom and love are deeply intertwined.

We step into a world where other people exist. And I know that sounds like a strange and obvious statement. Our lives overlap with the lives of so many people around us. In this world where other people besides us exist, those people are very different from one another. People have different interests and different ideas. But what becomes most obvious as we get to know other people is that different people have different struggles. Whether it's health, finances, relationships, or grief, everybody's struggling with something. And all struggles are ultimately connected to faith. Certainly, struggles can influence our faith, either causing us to doubt God's power and promises or being strengthened in faith during those difficult times. You know people who faced struggles and came out of whatever they were going through more assured of God's love, but you also know those who have abandoned the faith and blamed God when troubles came. So, if the people we've been placed into community with are people who have struggles, and those struggles have an effect on their faith, then certainly a Christian has the desire to help them bear their burdens.

This is what Paul is writing about here with the Corinthians. He's saying that Christians care deeply about the spiritual well-being of others. And as he often does, he uses himself and the other apostles as the examples for Christians to imitate. He writes, "Instead, we endure everything so as not to cause any hinderance for the gospel of Christ." The faith of another person is the most important thing they have. It's more important than our relationship with them, or the respect they have for us, or even our own physical safety. Whether they protect their faith or don't care about it and discard it foolishly, we know just how important their eternal soul is. But how do you love when faith is at stake? What are you willing to give up for the sake of another person's spiritual well-being?

And that brings us to the issue of Christian freedom. "What is Christian freedom?" you may ask. Well, in Christ, we are released from the punishment of sin. Death died on Calvary 2000 years ago. We've been released from slavery to the law. Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament ceremonial and civil laws to set us free from the law's requirements. And he freed us from living under the Ten Commandments in fear.

But we are not just set free from sin and death. We are also set free for a purpose. In Christ, we have the freedom to find joy in service to God and neighbor instead of serving out of miserable compulsion. We have the freedom to make choices in our lives when God's word is silent. That means that we are not prescribed by God which way we should worship or what foods we can eat. We're not told which job we should take or which person we should marry. We all get to have our own opinions on how secular government should be run and how it should carry out the broad task God gives it to promote good and hinder evil. And we're even given the freedom of how to spend our money and time.

But with this freedom comes responsibility too. Paul is not afraid to talk about his freedoms. And the freedom he talks about here is pay. Just because he is a servant of God, a minister of the word, does not mean he must forgo pay. In fact, Paul is entitled to compensation. But he chooses not to take it. Why? Because he doesn't want people to get even a whiff of self-enrichment in his message. He doesn't want people to think he's crafting some spiritual fable to take their money. He is willing to forgo his right of compensation for the sake of the faith of those he's ministering to.

The Lord has blessed us with many freedoms in Christ. Whenever we read through Old Testament worship laws and civil laws, inevitably someone says, "I'm so thankful I don't have to live that way." And I agree. But as I said before, freedom comes with responsibility. Listen to what Paul says: "In fact, although I am free from all, I enslaved myself to all so that I might gain many more." Paul is pointing out that Christians are slaves to no one. We have been set free by Christ. But because we know we share this life with a lot of other people, and because we understand that our interactions with people have an effect on their faith, either good or bad, Christians at times are willing to lay down their rights for the sake of others.

Let me give you a few examples of how Christians might do this. You get together with a friend in his garage to watch a few hours of college football and shoot the breeze on Saturday afternoon. You provide the beer. He provides the big screen. You do this almost every Saturday during fall. But you notice a trend after a few weeks. Your friend is having more than a couple. In fact, by the time you go home every week, he's three sheets to the wind. You notice that this is becoming a problem. Now, you have every right to drink a beer and watch college football. There is nothing sinful about that. But are you sitting by and watching as your friend's problem grows? And are you enabling it? Would you consider going over the next Saturday without a case of beer in hand? It might involve having to answer why you didn't bring it. It will definitely mean that you are sacrificing your freedom for another person.

Or, say you get tickets to a concert to go with friends. You know how all your friends are going to dress, in outfits that show off their curves or six-pack abs and expose lots of skin. Now, you've got clothes that would do the same. But is it worth spending a moment to think about how your attire will affect the people you're around at the concert? Might it lead people to the sin of lust? You have the freedom to dress how you'd like, but might that freedom be worth giving up in order to not lead others into temptation?

Let's think about one last one. It's Thanksgiving dinner. You sit down to eat with extended family, some of whom have different political views than you have. In fact, you know you're sitting on a powder keg as you push up to the table. You've seen the videos online, the ones of people flipping tables over, screaming at each other, and the person who organized the meal walking away in tears. Again, you have the Christian freedom to have and share your opinions. But what does an argument with someone staunchly on the other side accomplish? I can tell you what it won't accomplish: making that person comfortable in sharing their life's greatest worries and frustrations with you, getting to have a deep and fulfilling conversation about the Savior

together. This does not mean that you should never share your opinions, but aren't there times when you're willing to shut your mouth because something bigger is at stake?

What is Paul willing to give up so that even one more soul can be added to the ranks of heaven? Everything. And listen to what concessions he makes for the gospel: "To the weak, I became weak so that I may gain the weak. I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least one." You are free to live as you see fit in any way God does not speak against it in his word. But you also exist among many other people, people whose faith might be strengthened or weakened by their interactions with you. In love, don't you have the responsibility to consider what is best for them? And doesn't that same love drive you to lay down whatever rights and freedoms God may give you if it means leading them to God and not away from him.

If this sounds offensive to you, if you struggle with this idea of being willing to lay down your Christian freedoms to protect someone else's faith, then this is something you need to chew on. The excuse, "I have the right to do it and it's their problem if it affects them," only works if your neighbor's eternal well-being doesn't matter to you. Ask yourself, "Is this thing I like doing worth handing a person over to Satan for?" But maybe more than that, I want you to see an example even greater than Paul's of someone laying down their rights to rescue another.

You know that Jesus was without sin. You know he lived his entire life without giving into temptation. He did it! He was the only person to earn eternal life in heaven for himself. But the Father did not beam him up to heaven right away. Instead, Jesus handed himself over to his enemies to die. He had every right to claim what he had earned, but instead he made that lopsided trade with us. We get his righteousness, and he gets our sin. He laid aside the rights and freedoms that were his, not just to inconvenience himself, but to experience hell on behalf of a world full of sinners. His love for you led him to give up everything for you, so that you could be won.

What does freedom have to do with love? Freedom has everything to do with love. In his love for us, Christ sets us free from sin to make us free to serve him. Our love for our neighbor affects how we live in Christian freedom, at times setting aside our rights so that we can be exactly what our brother or sister needs us to be: God's voice in their lives. So go, live in freedom and love, moved by Christ's freeing love for you. Amen.