

Series: Corinthians, a Church in Progress

Sermon #4: Love Limits

1 Corinthians 8, 9

Dr. Matt Cassidy – March 20, 2022

Well, good morning, Grace! Ah, you've got to love that meet-and-greet, huh? It is good to be back. Let's get some Thundercloud's under the trees, let's have some fun. We're back.

Introduction

Listen, we'll be looking through 1 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9—they're together. They're supposed to be looked at together. If you'll be going there, I'll start with my little introduction. This week I was able to watch another mindless movie. (I have a way of doing that so I don't have to think—that's the whole point.) Anyway, this one was a traditional bratty-kid-gets-kidnapped and they get some kind of special forces guy to rescue the bratty kid. If you've seen one, you've seen them all. Somewhere in all of these there's a scene where the hero takes his shirt off. He's been working out for two years and hasn't had a carb in nine months. But besides that, he's wringing out his shirt that's full of sweat and blood, and they zoom in on his back. And you've seen this—it's just covered in scars, right? He's been hit with a few rounds and he's been tortured. And the point of that part of the introduction to this hero is to show you that he has paid a price. He has sacrificed and suffered a great deal of his life. He's made sacrifices, he's given up rights to safety, he's given up rights to his family, he's given up rights to being paid well. (None of these guys ... they always have to take a job, right?)

And he's showing all of that—his heroic, sacrificial nature—and then the bratty kid says something like, "You know, the water isn't even cold. And is this all we have to eat?" And the hero just kind of puts his face in his hands, thinking, *We're just trying to live. We're just trying to get through this.*

Okay. With that in mind, now you can understand 1 Corinthians 8 and 9. Because, just to understand those two chapters—but the first six words just hurt in the life of Paul. And Paul is the hero. And Paul, if he took his shirt off, his back is pretty ripped up too.

Paul Defends His Apostleship

In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul is defending his apostleship. And he's having to compare himself to other apostles. And he's trying to show that he's done as much or more as any other apostle. He's a hero. Here's what he says. This is right out of your Bible. It says, "I've worked much harder than they. I've been in prison more often than they have. I've been hurt more with beatings. I've been near death many times. Five times the Jews have given me over to their punishment of thirty-nine lashes with a whip. Three times I was beaten with rods." See his back? "One time I was almost stoned to death. Three times I was shipwrecked, and one of those times I spent a day and a night at sea. I have gone on many travels and have been in danger from rivers, with thieves, with my own people, the Jews, and with those who are not Jews. I've been in danger in cities and in places where no one lives, and on the sea itself. I've been in danger with false Christians. I have done hard and tiring work, and many times I did not sleep. I have been hungry and thirsty, and many times I didn't even have any food. I have been cold and without clothing."

2 Corinthians 11:28-29

Besides all this, there is on me every day the load of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ I feel weak every time someone is weak, and I feel upset every time someone is led into sin.

That's just the physical part. And then Paul says, *My heart and soul weigh heavy, for* "besides all this, there is on me every day the load of my concern for all the churches. I feel weak every time someone is weak, and I feel upset every time someone is led into sin."

Do you see the visual of our hero Paul? And then he hears this. He's responding to questions from this church.

1 Corinthians 8:1

Now concerning food offered to idols ...

And the question he has to answer is, "And now concerning food offered to idols ..." *Is this all we have to eat? I mean, don't we have our rights?* Paul is thinking, *Oh, my goodness.*

The Underlying Issue: Exercising Rights

So, for clarity, let me explain what food offered to idols means. In that culture during the Greek and the Roman times, most meat had been formally offered as a sacrifice. In other words, a cow or a goat was brought to some cultic worship center, the priest took that and then used some of it for the sacrifice itself, and then the rest was butchered and it was sold. And so, in many cities, most of the meat was formerly used in a cultic ritual. And Paul knew that the idols were fake, and so the meat was just meat. And his knowledge of good theology gave him the ability, and other knowledgeable people in their theology knew they had the freedom to eat that meat. But Paul also knew that there were people in the church who were new to the church and had come from cultic backgrounds, and they thought that meat had curses on it—had voodoo on it. And they felt like if they ate that, it would be a sin against their own conscience and against God. And so, they abstained from that.

And so, people are writing to Paul saying, *Hey, don't we have a right to eat any kind of meat we want?* So, it looks like the topic is about food and meat offered to idols, which sometimes you'll see people spend a lot of time on that. But that's not what it's about. The topic of chapters 8 and 9 is about your rights as a Christian, and the freedom you have with those rights, and how to use those rights.

And so, Paul is coming in and saying, *Your rights are supposed to be used to help people, inside the church and outside the church. The Christian life isn't about you and getting whatever you can get out of your freedoms in Christ; it's about using those freedoms to help the weak grow strong or helping the people who are lost to get found.* And anybody who's weaker is supposed to be served by the stronger. And the weaker could be, in this case, a conscience, or weaker theology, or maybe weaker physically, or weaker emotionally, or weaker financially. And Paul is saying, *Look, it's the love of Christ in you. That's the definition of maturity: to be looking for ways to serve others, not to be served by your own rights.*

And so, when he gets to the question of *Well, can we eat whatever we want now?*, Paul is going to say, *I don't think you understand what's happening.*

Paul is saying, *I feel like you guys are playing flag football where somebody pulls your flag and says, "I got you," and you say, "I'm sorry, I didn't even feel you pull my flag."* And Paul says, *No, Christian life is like being gladiators, and we fight unto death. This is not supposed to be a faith of trying to use as many rights to make you as comfortable as possible.*

The Christian faith is about serving as much as possible and to use whatever freedoms you might have to give and to care. Or, to give up those rights so that you give and care for those inside or outside the church.

1 Corinthians 8:1, 3

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that all of us possess knowledge. This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up.

³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

So, Paul’s a little bit upset with the question. He’s going to bring it up twice for that reason. But here’s how he originally states it. I’ll read chapter 8, verse 1 again: “Now concerning food offered to idols, we know that all of us possess knowledge. This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up ... If anyone loves God, he is known by God.”

So, the main issues in chapters 8 and 9 (actually, it spills over into 10) is that the Corinthian definition of knowledge is that I have the knowledge of all the freedoms and rights that I have. And Paul says that kind of knowledge just puffs you up. It makes you proud. It’s all about you. So, Paul says, *Look, my definition of maturity is not this knowledge that’s selfish, but knowledge that gives you the confidence to use those rights and those freedoms to get some serious ministry done. The rights that you have can be used for ministry, or the rights that you have can be surrendered for the purpose of ministry, for those people inside and outside the church. The Christian life is about sacrificing rights, not abusing your rights. You guys are just playing games. I’m playing for keeps here.*

So, if you’ll look at the outline, you’ll see in chapter 8 it’s about using your rights or giving up your rights for the sake of the weaker brother or sister that’s in the church. And then chapter 9 is talking about giving up your rights for the sake of the gospel, for those outside the church. That’s the point.

Chapter 8: For the Love of the Weak

So, we’ll look at chapter 8 first. And it’s about how you can use or surrender your rights for the sake of loving the weaker brother that’s among you.

Now, again, keep in mind that in the Corinthian church when they say these are younger brothers or weaker brothers, it means that they are coming out of the cultic background and they don't understand that idols are just stone or wood. They're not really anything. And for them to eat that kind of meat that has come off that idol worship is hurting their souls, because it's going against their conscience.

1 Corinthians 8:7-9

However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹ But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

So, here's what Paul says. "However, not all possess the knowledge that you have this freedom. But some, through former association with idols, eat the food." They think it's been offered to a real idol. "And their conscience, being weak, is defiled now. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and we are no better off if we do." But here's the thing. "But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak."

1 Corinthians 8:11-12

And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother and sisters for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

You're supposed to be looking out for others. The next sentence says, "And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother or sister for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you also sin against Christ himself."

So, you have all this knowledge of the freedom that you have in Christ and you know that idols aren't real and that meat is just meat. Sure, you have that knowledge, but he doesn't, she doesn't. And you, by eating that slab of brisket in front of them, are crushing them. You've sinned against them and you've sinned against Christ who died for them.

I think there's a subconscious little dig here. You want to talk about some rights being given up? How about Christ who died for you? Christ who had the right to just stay in heaven and didn't, for the love of souls. Christ, who had the right to come to earth and have a rather splendid or spectacular entrance, ends up being born in a barn, and his first smell as a newborn is of cattle manure. So, Christ who died for you gave up a lot of rights for love. It's not about how you get to use your rights; it's about how to give up your rights. Because, like Jesus, Paul is on mission. He is absolutely on mission, and he is playing for keeps. He's not playing games here.

1 Corinthians 8:13

Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

And so, verse 13 kind of summarizes this value. "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." Paul is saying, *Look, if my weaker brother or sister is threatened by me eating meat, I'll become a vegetarian. I don't care. It's just food. You're asking me to give up what I eat or drink for the sake of someone that I love that God loves? Absolutely I'll do that. I'll do that for the love of my weaker brother. I will be inconvenienced as much as I can because of my enjoyment of who they are. And I'm going to help them become like Christ in all of life and grow out of that. But until then, love limits our liberties. Love limits our comfort. Love limits our priorities towards the weak to make them feel as comfortable as possible as they grow and they become like Christ in all of life.*

And the application of chapter 8 is that you have to choose between your rights and all of your knowledge of your rights, for personal preference, so that you can get what you want; or Paul says that you can live your life so that you surrender those rights, knowing that you can do that for the sake of lifting up and making it easy for the weak, the weak that are financially weak or physically weak or emotionally weak or theologically weak here. Because love is stronger than your personal rights. That's the application for chapter 8. Paul is saying, *Look, I'm playing*

for real, and I feel like you guys are just playing games. I'm playing for keeps, and you guys are just playing.

Don't we have the right to do whatever? That's the question. Don't we have the right to do whatever we can under the freedom? And Paul is saying, *Your focus is on you, and that's not what Christianity is about. That's not what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is to be on mission. And the mission is to help the weak grow stronger and to help the people outside the church become followers of Jesus Christ. So, your freedoms and your rights are to be used for that. Or your rights are to be sacrificed for that, to help the weak become strong.*

Chapter 9: Paul's Love for the Power of the Gospel for the Lost

That's chapter 8. Now we're in chapter 9 to sacrifice those rights for the sake of the Gospel. Are you willing to sacrifice whatever rights you have for the sake of making it easier for someone to come to the knowledge of Jesus Christ?

It's not a difficult decision for Paul because he loves the power of the Gospel. It has the power of transformation, that your sins are taken care of, all the charges are dropped. You have intimacy with God. You have eternity with God. You spend eternity in heaven with Him. And Paul says, *I will give up every single right that I have to make it easy for someone to hear the Gospel and respond to that Gospel.* He's going to make himself a slave to that. He's going to constantly be surrendering himself for that cause. And even as an apostle in chapter 9, he's going to say, *I have a lot of rights. And I'll show you how many I'm giving up, so that you can follow me as I follow Christ.*

1 Corinthians 9:1

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

In chapter 9, verse 1—in a few verses he's going to bring up the eating and drinking again—in verse 1, he says, "Am I not free?" Well, yeah. "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?" Yeah, uh-huh.

1 Corinthians 9: 3-4

This is my defense to those who would examine me. ⁴ Do we not have the right to eat and drink?

And then in verses 3 and 4: “This is my defense to those who are examining me. Do we not have the right to eat and drink?” *I have as many freedoms as you. I have a higher rank than you. And you’re asking me, “Is this all we have to eat? This water’s not very cold. How come I can’t have brisket whenever I want? Don’t make me give up bacon.”*

And I just want you to feel that the question itself is grieving the soul of Paul. And it’s grieving the soul of God that you might be inconvenienced by your love for your weaker brother or those outside the church for food---for food? And so, Paul’s going to make a list of the rights that he’s surrendered. In that, he’s saying—he said it in another book, but he’s saying, *Follow me as I follow Christ. But know this, I’m playing for keeps. I’m not playing games. And so, I’ll do anything. I will do anything for the sake of the Gospel.*

1 Corinthians 9:5

Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Peter?

And so, he starts off by saying, *Don’t I have a right to a wife? Sure, I have a right to a wife, don’t I?* Look what he says in verse 5: “Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Peter?” *Sure, all these other guys have wives. I have chosen to give up my right to have a lifetime companion and the joy and intimacy that I could have with her, because I’ve chosen to serve the Lord in the context of dangerous missionary journeys. And it was easier to make the Gospel known throughout the Roman Empire by surrendering the right to a wife. So, what were you asking about? If you have the right to eat lobster? I gave up a wife.*

And then he goes on. He says, *Don’t I have a right to get paid? I have a right to get paid.* And so, the Corinthian church was not paying Paul. He won’t take payment from them. And I’m going to tell you why in just a few minutes. But Paul is just going to give example after example, illustration after illustration, showing that he has a right to get paid by the people that he’s

serving. And as he's going through this, he's keeping in mind, saying, *Look, I'm in this for real, and you're in it for play. And I'm giving up these things, but I have a right to get paid.*

You can read it on your own in verses 6 through 15. It's the longest section in chapter 9. He says, *A soldier has the right to get paid by the country that he's defending. Sure.* And then he says, *A farmer has the right to get paid from the orchard in which he's working. I mean, the guy owns the apple orchard, and he gets apples. The rancher has a cow. He gets to get paid by the cow. He gets milk and cheese. Come on!*

And then he says, *Okay, so those are common examples. I'll go to the law of Moses, okay? In Deuteronomy, there's a commandment that when the ox is working, you can't keep him from being fed.* And so, he's saying that the soldier has rights, and the farmer has rights, and the rancher has rights. *The dadgum ox has rights that I'm not using. They all have a right to get paid. I'm not getting paid.*

You want more? He goes on and says that the Levites who work in the temple, when you bring the sheep in, they get to eat that meat. That's how they get paid. *Everybody's getting paid for how they serve, the people that they're working with. Not me.*

1 Corinthians 9:12

If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

Verse 12, he says, "If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right that I have, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ." *I'm not going to take payment from you because it would slow down the Gospel in Corinth.*

1 Corinthians 9:14

In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

“In the same way,” verse 14, “the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.” *So, even Jesus Christ says that I ought to be getting paid by you.*

And the reason that Paul is not going to take any money from the Corinthians is because they’ve suggested that he’s just a traveling itinerant speaker that’s come in to make some money. *I don’t want to be accused of coming in to try to grab some Corinthian coin. I just want Corinthian souls. And because of that, to stay above any accusations, I’m releasing my right to get paid. And even the oxen get paid more than I do.*

He’s doing this for the sake of the Gospel, he says, to make it easier for Christ to be heard. So, he says, *I’ll just work nights.* And so, he’s doing some ministry during the daytime in the villages, and then he might go and speak at the temple in the afternoon, and then he goes and has some dinner. He’s just dead tired, and he starts making tents. He’s sewing tents so he can pay some bills, because he’s giving up the right for an income because it just might slow down the Gospel in Corinth.

So, here’s Paul, just stack upon stack, illustration upon illustration, evidence upon evidence, that says, *I have a right to get paid for my preaching and I’m giving up all these rights because something is strongly more important than my rights.*

1 Corinthians 9:15

But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision.

He says in verse 15, “But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision.” *I’m not hinting that I want to get paid.*

1 Corinthians 9:18

What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

The next verse: “What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.” Why is he doing that? *I love the lost*, Paul says. *I love God, and I know God loves the lost. And I’m on a mission and it’s going to cost me, not you. I’ll pay anything to make sure this mission is above reproach.*

The strength of any cause is fundamentally attached and completely dependent upon the people in the cause and their commitment to it. How much are they willing to give towards that cause? How much are they willing to sacrifice? What is the dedication of the people in that cause? And what are they willing to give up? People that change the world or change the world around them are people that are willing to be committed, to give up anything, to surrender their rights. People with lackadaisical ...I-know-my-rights people don’t change very much of anything around them. The people that are committed change the world around them because they are on a mission, and the mission is more important than their very lives.

And so, Paul just says, *Look, your knowledge of all your freedoms is to be used to serve those people and make it easy for them to hear the Gospel. And if those rights make it easy, that’s great. If you need to surrender your rights, better still. He says, I’ll do anything for the Gospel.*

I love how Haddon Robinson summarizes this section by saying that Paul’s conclusion is that he will do anything short of sin to win people. *I will do anything short of sin to win people.*

1 Corinthians 9:19

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win more of them.

Look what he says in verse 19: “Though I am free from all, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win more of them.” *I’ve become a slave ...* The Corinthians are talking about their rights and Paul is saying, *I’m a slave. Slaves don’t have rights. I have chosen to give up all my rights. I’m going to be a slave to Jews.*

1 Corinthians 9:20

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.

Look what he says: “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law.” *Look*, he says, “though not being myself under the law.” *I’ve got the theology.* “...that I might win those under the law.” *I’m a slave to the Jewish culture. If I’m meeting with the Jews, I’m kosher. I’m acknowledging their holy days, I’m involving myself in their rituals all day, because the Gospel means more than my rights.*

1 Corinthians 9:21

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

I’m a slave to Gentiles, he says. “To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ)”—*I’m not going to anything immoral*—“that I might win those outside the law.”

So, Paul comes into a Gentile or Corinthian type city, a Greco-Roman city, and he’s super cosmopolitan now. Look at you, fitting in just perfectly, thank you very much. And he’s going to preach differently, he’s going to use different illustrations, he’s going to quote their philosophers. He’ll do whatever it takes. He’ll teach in Athens like he’s an Athenian, not like in Jerusalem.

1 Corinthians 9:22a

To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.

Paul says, *I will be a slave to the weak*. He keeps going—the next sentence: “To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.” And the weak are the ones who are dragging around a bunch of false guilt and are oversensitive to right and wrong, and they’re too young, they’re too

ignorant. And so, he says, *Until you are grown up, I'm just going to live my life around your oversensitive conscience. That's okay. I'm a slave to whatever makes you hear the Gospel most effectively.*

1 Corinthians 9:22b-23

I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

The big point is that it's not about rights. It's not about his rights. The next verse says, "I will become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do all of this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." Paul says, *I'm on a mission here. We're playing for real.* And the Corinthians are just playing games.

Are we playing games? The problem with the Church for two thousand years is this conflict of completely different paradigms of what the Christian church and the Church is supposed to be like. And you can see this wherever you look. Let me illustrate. It is exceptionally difficult to start a church, a brand-new church. It is laborious and it is painful. And I mean it's painful for everyone. It's exceptionally painful for everyone involved—the pastor, all the people that are helping lead, because everyone is setting up chairs or doing something. It's painful for the babies. Everyone has to pay a price to start a new church. They don't have two buildings like we have at the bottom of the hill with full-time staff and hundreds of volunteers. You serve in the children's ministry when you start a church and you disappear.

You know what's harder than starting a new church—significantly harder than starting a new church? Do you know the reason people start new churches? Because it is harder to turn an existing church consumed with their rights and whether or not they get to eat brisket and bacon, and move them over here and say, *How do I love those who are weaker in the faith and what do I need to sacrifice to make it easy for the Gospel to be heard?* That's a hard thing to do. And if you want proof, look around to any major city in the world.

Look right here. There's an old church with a few people attending in a very strategic location, able to seat two hundred, but there are only seven people there. And meanwhile, at the same time, right down the street (you can throw a rock there), meeting at a gym or at a school or a car dealership, there's a new church getting started. And they're fighting for some place to

meet. Why is that happening? Because the people doing the startup church are slaves to the mission and the cause of Christ. And they'll do anything that's necessary. And that near-empty church, on the other hand, what's left, the remnant, are holding onto their rights. They have their freedom, they know, and it's like they're saying, *This water is not cold enough. Is this all we have to eat? And I'm holding onto my right. I get to sit in this seat and I want to hear the music I like to hear and the style of teaching that's preferable to me, and that's what I'm going to do.* They have a value of holding their tradition over trying to reach their own grandchildren. And that's been taking place everywhere for two thousand years now.

Paul Is Running to Win the Race

And Paul comes in and says, *Look, let's do it right. Follow me as I follow Christ. And me? I've become a slave to the mission. I don't have rights anymore. There are no rights if you get it. Paul is inviting us all in. He's saying, Do you want to play for keeps? Or do you want to just keep playing the game?* There's fire in this man's belly. He's running to win.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and make it my slave, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Look what he says in verse 24. This is his illustration of what is boiling inside of his soul. "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run like you're out to obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things." Giving up rights all the time ... "They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we're doing it for an imperishable wreath. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box like one beating the air. But I discipline my body and"—here it is again—"I make it a slave, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."

My body is a slave. I don't let it be whining about comfort or not, whether I can eat or drink. It's the means of me doing the cause. He's not playing flag football where it's like, *Oh, I*

almost skinned my knee. He's full contact, no helmets. He's not beating the air like shadow boxing. He's in the ring giving and taking punches. He says, *I will do anything short of sin to make the Gospel easy to hear.* And that's the value of a good Christian. It's always been that way.

From the beginning years, when the Church was still in a crib in the Book of Acts, they're trying to figure out, *How far can we go? How many rights can we surrender for the sake of people coming to know what the Gospel is and to build up our weaker brothers and sisters?*

Acts 15:19

... we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

And so, in Acts 15, James summarizes and says, *Look, here's the philosophy of decision making in churches.* He says this: "...and we should not make it difficult for Gentiles [or Jews] who are turning to God." That should everybody's motto. We should not make it difficult for anyone who is turning to God, giving up any rights we might have.

Decisions Made by Grace Covenant Church

That's the philosophy of the decision making that we do here at Grace. We are trying to do whatever it is to not make it difficult for as many people to come to this place and to become like Christ in all of life or to be introduced to Christ for the first time.

I'll say this. As the senior pastor here, the greatest joy in the context of my career has been this: that in the last few years, the last decade, the people in leadership—our elders and the people on our staff—all of them are gladiators. Not one of them has ever raised this question: *Well, but isn't it our right to be comfortable? Wouldn't that be inconvenient?* No, it's always been, *How do we make it as easy as possible for as many people to come here and become like Christ in all of life, the weak growing up, and for people on the outside to be coming in?* It's a joy, it's a blessing, to hear people say, *We're good.* It's good to be in a room full of gladiators when you're making decisions about gladiator sorts of things. And it's anything short of sin, anything short of sin to hear the power of the Gospel. That's what keeps us on mission here.

Are you on mission? Are you playing for keeps, or are you just playing around?

Imagine Timothy's Letter to the Corinthians

When I was reading this, I thought, I would love to hear what Timothy would answer to the question, *Hey, we have the right to eat or drink anything we want, right? Because now we have all this freedom in Christ, right? I can do anything I want.* I would love to hear Timothy's answer. It would be a little different in tone.

Let me tell you a little bit about Timothy. Timothy is Paul's traveling companion and becomes a pastor later on. His mother was Jewish and his father was Greek. So, he's Jewish, but he didn't get circumcised. So, while he and Paul are traveling around—circumcision is a Jewish ritual where you're obeying a law and you're honoring the traditions of Judaism. And when they would go in the synagogues, Timothy not being circumcised was causing difficulty because it did not show that he was honoring the traditions of the Jewish faith. And he had the freedom in Christ not to be circumcised. He had his rights. But for the sake of the Gospel and to make it easier to go into synagogues, he and Paul talked it out, and he chose to be circumcised as a grown man for the sake of the Gospel.

Now, I'm going to spin this around a little bit differently for us. I'm going to say some things in the next few seconds, and don't write me an e-mail. Don't get all upset and then black out because there's kind of a funny, but true, application at the end of this. Okay? Because it's just about the whole circumcision thing and about how he couldn't get into a temple or a synagogue.

What if we, because it would mean more people could come here, and to make it easier for people to hear the Gospel and to become like Christ in all of life, said that you had to be vaccinated? Don't write the e-mail. And then we had to validate that vaccination.

So, you would come up, and we'd check in, and we'd say, "Have you been vaccinated?" And you would say, "You know what? I have the right to privacy. I don't have to tell you."

"Yeah, you do. You have that right."

"But I've been vaccinated."

"Okay, fine. Do you have proof? Can I see your vaccination card?"

“I have a right to not show you this.”

“I know, but I’m just asking.”

Okay, see the picture? I don’t know what was going on back then, but Timothy was asked going into a synagogue, “Have you been circumcised?”

And he could have said, “I have a right to a certain amount of privacy in my life, if you don’t mind, but I have been circumcised.”

“Do you have proof of circumcision?”

“I have a right to a certain amount of privacy about my private parts. That’s why they’re private.”

See what I’m saying? Not only did he go through excruciating pain as a grown adult, but then he had the humiliation of it. And the point is that when Timothy hears that the Corinthian church wants to know if they can have brisket—they’re wondering about their right to lobster...*Give me the pen, Paul. Just let me have that.*

Conclusion

Do not complain about a church of inconvenience when there are saints in the room listening. The people that are playing for real are hurt by this. And go amongst your friends that are just playing and talk about your music or your style. But don’t say it in front of Paul or Timothy who say, “For though I am free of all of this, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win just a little more of them. I will be all things to all people. I will be enslaved to that because of the mission, because of the cause, because of the Gospel, because of this weaker brother needing to get over his fake guilt. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

So, are you playing for keeps? Or are you just playing? Are you on mission for the greater cause? Do you love God? Do you love the things that God loves? We’re not running for some stupid little ivy wreath that sits on our crown. We’re looking at eternal crowns on our brows forever. And we give them back to Christ for His glory. That’s what we’re running for. That’s what we’re living for. There is no such thing as sacrifice if we’re only upgrading to a greater blessing and showing our love for God and the things that God loves.

So, when somebody in Corinthians asks Paul, “So, what about my rights?” this is Paul’s answer. Let’s follow Paul as he follows Christ.

Let’s pray.

Oh, God, that wreath is temporal. And people give their lives for that wreath. And we're running for an eternal crown. God, don't let this church become a shuck, a hollow shell of tradition, holding onto things that don't matter because we had a right to that preference. Oh, dear God, Lord, if there are issues of confession in our souls because we wanted this church to be convenient, let this be a time of confession and repentance. But Lord, let this be a church that will do anything short of sin, so that we can lift up a weaker brother and make him strong, and we could introduce people to Jesus Christ for the first time, and we'd become slaves to whatever is necessary to make that happen. And that the rights that You give us, we would use the rights of our freedoms to make that happen. And if those rights get in the way, we can't wait to give them back to You as an expression or an offering to You. God bless our church because we love what You love. We love helping our weaker brother and sister and we love reaching out to those not like us. Be blessed by our obedience. We pray this in Jesus' name. And everybody said ... Amen.