

Today we reach the end of our Pentecost season for this year. Remember, the season of Pentecost is a time when we consider what our lives are like for our Lord now that we have come to faith. Our focus still remains Christ crucified, since it is his sacrifice and our faith in him that makes our lives for him now possible. But we study, we learn and we grow in our Christian lives as we seek to use his law as a guide on how to live better, to live in thanks for what he has done for us. And the Apostle Paul today walks us through a lesson that really cuts to the heart of what it means to live a Christian life for our Lord every day of our lives.

<Read text: 1 Corinthians 9:7-12,19-23>.

You see here that we again visit the concept of what is “owed” us. Remember last week we looked at Gehazi, the servant of Elisha and how his greed caused him to think he was owed something he wasn’t and in the end that greed endangered another man’s new faith and brought down a harsh judgment upon himself. And looking at what we have done for our God, or rather what we haven’t done for him and what we have done against him, we recognized that our God does not owe us anything. Everything we have is a gift from him, none of it is earned or deserved.

So does that mean what Paul starts off saying here is contradictory to that? Here he talks about a worker being worth his wages. He says that a soldier or farmer or shepherd all benefit from the labors they exert in their own field. In fact, even the Lord in the Law of Moses taught the people not to muzzle an ox while it was treading out grain. A muzzle would have kept the ox’s mouth covered and prevented him from munching on the grain he was treading as he walked. The Lord said, no, let the ox benefit some from the labor he is performing. He should share in it. And as Paul rightly points out, it’s not so much oxen that God is concerned, it’s about us. It’s a metaphor for the labors we all perform and thereby should benefit from.

So again, is this going against what we said before? Are we, in fact, owed something for our labor? Still no. You see, this section isn’t written to those who do the serving, it’s written to those who are served. Or to put it in more modern terms; this isn’t written to the employee but the employer. God isn’t saying this here so you can be concerned about what is owed you, rather about what you owe others. God provides all we have, and he will always provide our daily needs without our deserving, but he still tends to do this through earthly means. Through our work and labor, through others. And so he established this system of work and repayment to accomplish this most of the time. He calls for employers to give the employees what they deserve. And yet, it is still in the Lord’s hands. Should the employee fail to work, God will still provide. Should the employer fail in his or her task, God will still provide. That’s the point of the promise of his grace. But his promises never give us excuse to neglect our roles or duties to him. And so we are called to work where we ought and to give what is owed to others.

It can get a little confusing to think of it this way, because it doesn’t work out to our logical minds. If none of us are owed anything, then how can we owe someone else? But that’s almost exactly the point of the Christian life. The Christian life, living for the Lord, is not concerned about what it can get, but only about what it can give. We see here that Paul makes the case that he and his companions have a right to be compensated for their spiritual work among the Corinthians. In fact, for shepherding them with God’s word and providing them with what they need for eternal life, they should be paid more than any other profession, based on the value of their service! But Paul chose not to do so in order to enhance his own joy and to keep the gospel from being hindered.

Certainly if Paul or any other minister of the gospel became incredibly wealthy on account of their service to the Lord and his people, there could be any number of problems or obstacles that could get in the way of saving souls. For the minister, the money could become the point of the work, and the money could become the god that is served instead of the Lord. This is always the temptation in the face of wealth. But perhaps even worse, the ministry would attract those who had no real interest in caring for the souls of those who need saving but rather were only interested in the zeroes on the paycheck, and the value of the public ministry office would be diminished. People would be less inclined to listen to or trust their ministers if they felt (rightly or wrongly) that the minister was in it for the money.

For most called shepherds of the gospel, we compensate an appropriate amount for the calling. Not too much, not too little. Enough that the man can give his full time and attention to the work he does for you and the Lord, but not so much as to be a stumbling block in his faith or the faith of others. But notice here again that this was not Paul’s practice. Paul chose to set aside all compensation. He tells us elsewhere in scripture that his reasons for doing so were his own and do not apply to most workers. You see, most public ministers give their lives over to the Lord as an offering of thanks and out of a heart of love. This is their great offering to God for what he has done for them. Paul was unable to do this. His

calling to preach the gospel was a direct one from God. He was commanded and compelled to go, it was not a personal choice. And so his personal offering was to do the work for free and to earn his living along the way as a tentmaker.

See, it's Paul's ambition that we really want to focus on today. Certainly as Christians we want to make sure we're giving what we ought, but we can't start there; as always we need to start in our own hearts so that the correct actions can flow out of a heart made whole by the Lord. And Paul's example is one that we can hold up and look to. Paul's ambition and Paul's zeal were directed in the correct place; entirely away from himself and towards the good of those he served and the glory of the Lord.

This, of course, runs contrary to our natural inclinations. When we hear the word "ambition" we usually think of someone striving to get ahead, right? An ambitious person is one who sets high goals for himself and strives to reach them. And they take advantage of every opportunity in their own favor to do so. Not even necessarily in an unscrupulous way, though there are plenty who do, but just someone who really strives to grow and improve by whatever means he can. The person whose bank account never grows or job never advances is often labeled by the world as "unambitious".

Certainly we've all fallen into this mindset from time to time. It goes back to that feeling that we are owed something. That the world needs to do for me from time to time. That I need to insist on my rights and my compensation or I'll never get ahead or amount to anything. I do plenty, it's time some people started doing for me.

Now consider Paul's example of ambition. Everything that was owed him, he set aside when necessary. Everything that he had a right to insist on, he did not when the situation called for it. His ambition caused him to forgo payment for his spiritual work. His ambition made him observe Jewish customs when it not asked of him. His ambition led him to live as a Gentile when he needed to. His ambition led him to give up rights like eating meat or observing certain festivals or whatever the weaker brother or sister struggled with. Instead of insisting on his rights, instead of doing for himself, he set himself aside in order to serve anyone he could with the gospel truth.

And Paul delighted to do this. The world would call him a fool. His ambition never gained him anything. He didn't have a nice pension or savings account to retire on, his name wasn't revered by the masses. He didn't have a fancy house or family to come home to. By all accounts, he would die a martyr's death after a lengthy imprisonment. Most standards would call that a life of a failure, with nothing to show for it. Paul would not.

To start with, he already had more than he could ever need. He had been one of the worst of sinners, not just casually pursuing sin in his own life, he actively persecuted the true church of the Lord. He tried to stamp out this name of Jesus wherever he could. He actively fought against God and yet God chose to change his heart and show him the light of the gospel of forgiveness. Paul was saved. He knew that by Jesus he would not die for his sins but he would live forever with God. You want to talk ambition, you want to talk "getting ahead", there it is. It doesn't get better than that, you can't top that. And Paul already had that. What more could he gain, what more could he add to that during his life? The only thing he could do would be to see to it that others received this same grace.

But he was doubly blessed as he carried this mission out. You see, the gospel strikes our hearts in different ways. Where we each hurt from our sin, that is where the gospel heals us best. Wherever we have been prideful and arrogant, thinking we know better than God, wherever our sin cuts us deepest, that is where we feel the balm of the gospel's simple message "You are forgiven" the best. The deeper our understanding of our own sin, the more we see it in our own lives, the greater the blessing of the gospel cure is for us. Paul, by becoming all things to all people, was able to identify with situations he may have never otherwise personally been in, he was able to empathize with their hurt and then also able to share in the gospel blessings that came to them.

Brothers and sisters, let this be your ambition going forward in the Lord. Don't look to earthly rewards to find your fulfillment. Don't insist on your rights or what is owed you. Instead, fill your hearts with the gospel that has saved you. Realize that with heaven as your promised eternal home, things cannot get better for you, you have everything you need and more! There's no need to "improve" your life because it is the best it will ever get in the Lord. Fill yourself to overflowing with the love of the Lord who died to save you and pour out that love into the world around you. Give up yourself, your pride and your worldly ambition. Look instead to serve wherever you can. Serve before it is deserved, serve without compensation, serve freely that others may be saved like you are. Do it all for the sake of the gospel that has saved you, and you too will share in its blessings. Amen.