

“The Four R’s”

1 Corinthians 9

Hymns: #22 What a Friend We Have in Jesus (BGCS) # Thank You for Giving to the Lord- Ray Boltz

Reading: 1 Corinthians 9

Have you ever heard of the “Three Rs” in education? The “Three Rs” refer to the foundations of a basic skills-oriented education program in schools: reading, writing and arithmetic. The “Three Rs” have been known and valued for a long time. It appeared in print as a space-filler in "The Lady's Magazine" back in 1818, although it is widely quoted as arising from a phrase coined in a speech given by Sir William Curtis, Member of Parliament, in about 1795. There is even an earlier reference to "reading, writing, and arithmetic" in St Augustine of Hippo's Confessions (c. 397-401)¹ For many years now the lament has been raised over the quality of our education system and much of the blame has been aimed at the departure from holding firmly to and teaching the “Three Rs.”

This morning as we come to chapter 9 of 1 Corinthians, Paul is going to do one better and introduce us to the “Four Rs”. These “Four Rs” point us to the foundation of a basic spiritual skills-oriented education program for the boasting baby believers in the Corinthian church. In this chapter we will see the Reality, Rights, Rewards and Race that the Apostle Paul demonstrates for this young and carnal church. In doing so, he gives them and us a solid foundation and perspective that will serve them well for the rest of their lives.

1. Reality of Paul’s Apostleship (V. 1-3) *“Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? 2Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. 3This is my defence to those who sit in judgment on me.”*

This chapter starts with Paul asking four rhetorical questions, all of which demand a firm and positive “Yes” in reply. You see, “It seemed that the rumblings of doubt about (Paul’s) his apostleship, which would later call forth an extended defence (2 Cor. 10-13) had already started.”² So Paul asks, “Am I not free?” Yes of course Paul is free. In fact he is going to model for the Corinthians the freedom he spoke of back in chapter 6; that is, the true freedom to NOT do something. “Am I not an apostle?” Yes, of course he is. Ch. 1 v.1 of this letter he calls himself a “called apostle”. He was called by the Lord Jesus Christ on the Road to Damascus and commissioned. “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” Yes, of course he has. Personal experience of seeing the resurrected Christ was one of the qualifications for being an apostle (Acts 1:21-22) and Paul saw him on the road to Damascus. “Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?” Yes, of course they were. He established this back in 4:15 saying “I have begotten you”; “I became your father through the gospel.

The Corinthians could not deny any of this. But nevertheless, there were some in Corinth who were doubting Paul’s apostolic claim. And it appears their reason was because they didn’t see Paul receiving support from the church like the other apostles were. If he wasn’t getting the churches support but was working making tents, perhaps he wasn’t a real apostle. Paul grabs this proverbial bull by the horns and turns it right around. In fact, his defence of his apostleship is seen in his refusal to be maintained at the church’s expense, even though he has a right to it. He is walking his talk and modelling what he taught in the previous chapter; namely yielding his right of way to these weak

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_three_Rs

² David K. Lowry; 1 Corinthians; The Bible Knowledge Commentary- An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty; 1983; SP Publications (p.522)

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believers and refusing to exercise his rights as an apostle so as not to be a stumbling block to them in any way.

Have you ever had anyone think you are a fraud or think you are full of yourself because you have stepped out in faith to exercise your God given gifts and calling? Or have you ever had anyone throw the truth of the gospel back in your face when you have shared with them? How do you defend yourself as a Christian? Like Paul, you too can say “I have seen the Lord”. You have not seen Him with your physical eyes, but if you are a believer, you have seen the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ with your spiritual eyes; you have seen Him in the pages of the Word of God; and as Peter says “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” (1 Pet. 1:8-9). Like Paul you have a second defence. You may not be able to claim to have begotten a church through your gifts, but the very fact that you are witnessing to them is proof that you are the real deal. Paul affirms this proof later in chapter 12:3 writing “...no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’, except by the Holy Spirit.” No other defence is required and certainly no arguments. Stand firm in confidence that you have seen the Lord and that you are witnessing to Him by the Spirit.

2. Rights of Paul’s Apostleship (V. 4-16) *“Don’t we have the right to food and drink? 5Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas? 6Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? 7Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? 8Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn’t the Law say the same thing? 9For it is written in the Law of Moses: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it about oxen that God is concerned? 10Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. 11If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? 12If others have this right of support from you, shouldn’t we have it all the more? 13But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. Don’t you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? 14In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. 15But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. 16Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”*

Paul continues the defence of his apostleship by fully affirming his rights as an apostle. He had the right to food at the expense of the church; he had the right to take a wife with him at the expense of the church; he had the right to receive the Corinthian’s financial and material support at the expense of the church. Warren Wiersbe writes, “Paul had a right to devote his full time to the ministry of the word. He did not have to make tents. The other apostles did not work to support themselves because they gave themselves completely to the ministry of the word.”³

This was not something new. This precedent was set back in Acts 6 when the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “**It would not be**

³ Warren Wiersbe; *Be Wise - 1 Corinthians*; Victor Books; 1983; p. 100

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right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and **will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.**"

This right belonged to Apollos and other apostles; to the Lords brothers (James, Joseph, Simon, Jude –Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3), and to Peter. Paul and Barnabas had this right too. David Lowry writes, "Though unattested, it is probable that Peter ministered in Corinth (1:12; 3:22; 15:5) and was supported during that time by the church. The same was probably also true of Apollos (1:12; 3:4-6, 22; 4:6; 16:12). If the church supported them, their founding father Paul was surely no less deserving."⁴

Paul gives several illustrations to make the point clear that he and Barnabas did not have to work for a living. Soldiers, vineyard workers, shepherds, oxen treading out the grain, ploughman and threshers...all benefited directly from that which they laboured in.

Vs. 11 and 14 hold Paul’s key principle: “If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?” “...the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.”

We see this principle throughout the NT:

- Gal. 6:6 “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.”
- Rom. 15:26-27 “For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.”
- 1 Tim. 5: 17-18 “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain.”

The application for the church is clear: You support the place where you are being fed. You don’t eat at restaurant and then just walk out. Neither do you eat at one restaurant then walk across the street to pay your bill at another. The local fellowship where you are being fed is your first obligation and should be the target of your tithe. After that, your additional giving can be directed to other worthy needs.

But it is right at this point that we see Paul relinquish his rights to such support.

The story is told of a man who called at the church and asked if he could speak to the Head Hog at the Trough. The secretary said “Who?” The man replied, I want to speak to the Head Hog at the Trough. Sure now that she had heard correctly, the secretary said, “Sir, if you mean our pastor, you will have to treat him with more respect- and ask for the “The Reverend” or “The Pastor”. But certainly you cannot refer to him as the Head Hog at the Trough!” At this, the man came back, “Oh, I see. Well I have ten thousand dollars I was thinking of donating to the Building Fund. The Secretary said: Hold the line...I think the Big Pig just walked in the door.”⁵

It appears as if some of the Corinthians viewed itinerate teachers simply as pigs with their snout in the trough and motivated by nothing but profit and financial gain. It is for these weak believers that Paul, modelling what he taught in chapter 8, relinquished his right to receive support from those to whom he ministered and so as not to become a stumbling block to any of them. Some took this as

⁴ David K. Lowry; *1 Corinthians; The Bible Knowledge Commentary- An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty; 1983; SP Publications (p.523)*

⁵ Chuck Swindoll; *Ultimate Book of Illustrations and Quotes; Thomas Nelson Publishers; 1998; p. 534-35*

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sign that Paul was a fraud. But he was not moved. He would rather be thought of as a fraud by some rather than allow his rights to be in anyway a stumbling block to the weak. Paul says v. 12 “We put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel.”

We know that Paul did exercise his right of support and accepted financial support from other churches. The Philippian church sent Paul two gifts when he went to Thessalonica (Phil. 4:14-19) and Paul writes later to the Corinthians that he “robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you.” (2 Cor. 11:8)

There was once a very gaunt and skinny itinerate preacher who rode a beautiful, sleek and strong Chesnutt horse. One Sunday some of the parishioners got up the courage and asked, “Why is the horse you ride so sleek and strong, but you are so gaunt and skinny. The preacher replied. “Well, the reason is because I feed my horse...and you feed me.”

What kind of stewardship are you exercising in your tithing, material and financial support of where you are being spiritually fed? Are you muzzling the ox while he treads out the grain for you?

3. Reward of Paul’s Apostleship (V. 17-23) *“17If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. 18What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it. 19Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. 22To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. 23I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”*

Reward is the third of Paul’s “Four Rs” and he wants them to know that, though he is forgoing his rights for their sake, he is actually gaining reward. Paul’s faith saw that he was being rewarded and recompensed, he just wasn’t receiving it now. It was being transferred by direct deposit to heaven. Much like your superannuation is in fact recompensed to your account every quarter; it’s yours and you have received it...you just can’t access it until you retire. This is how Paul saw things. He fully understood and lived the principle of gratification delay; of storing up treasure in heaven. Offering his gifts and preaching without any financial support was his reward, much like those who Hebrews 11:35 mentions those who “were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection.”

Paul describes his modus operandi as becoming “All things to all men”. In saying this, “Paul was not a chameleon who changed his message and methods with each new situation. Nor was Paul a compromiser who adjusted his message to please his audience. He was an ambassador, not a politician...he did not parade his liberty before Jews or impose the Law on Gentiles.”⁶

Are you doing anything in your Christian life that is actually costing you anything? Have you willingly given up your rights to anything for the sake of the Gospel so that “some” might be saved?

Back in the days of the Great Depression a Missouri man named John Griffith was the controller of a great railroad drawbridge across the Mississippi River. One day in the summer of 1937, he decided to take his eight year old son, Greg, with him to work. At noon Griffith put the draw bridge up to

⁶ Warren Wiersbe; *Be Wise- 1 Corinthians*; Victor Books; 1983; p. 105

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allow ships to pass and sat on the observation deck with his son to eat lunch. Time passed quickly. Suddenly, he was startled by the shrieking of a train whistle in the distance. He quickly looked at his watch and noticed it was 1:07- the Memphis Express, with four hundred passengers on board, was roaring towards the raised bridge! He leaped from the observation deck and ran back to the control tower. Just before throwing the master lever he glanced down for any ships below. There a sight caught his eye that caused his heart to leap poundingly into his throat. Greg had slipped from the observation deck and fallen into the massive gears that operate the bridge. His left leg was caught in the cogs of the two main gears! Desperately John's mind whirled to devise a rescue plan. But as soon as he thought of a possibility he knew there was no way it could be done. Again with alarming closeness, the train whistle shrieked in the air. He could hear the clinking of the locomotive wheels over the tracks. That was his son down there- yet there were four hundred passengers on the train. John knew what he had to do, so he buried his head in his left arm and pushed the master switch forward. The great massive bridge lowered into place just as the Memphis Express began to roar across the river. When John Griffith lifted his head with his face smeared with tears, he looked into the passing windows of the train. There were business men casually reading their afternoon papers, finely dressed ladies in the dining car sipping coffee, and children pushing long spoons into their dishes of ice cream. No one looked at the control house, and no one looked at the great gear box. With wrenching agony, John Griffith cried out at the steel train: “I sacrificed my son for you people! Don’t you care?” The train rushed by but none heard the father’s words.”⁷

All our sacrificial giving and living is a participation in the heart of God who gave His Son for us. Though the world carelessly speed by doesn’t hear the Father’s words or see your sacrifice...God sees it and great is your reward in heaven.

4. Race of Paul’s Apostleship (V. 24-27) *“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 25Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 26Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. 27No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”*

Here is Paul’s Fourth R. He wants the Corinthians and us to know we are in a great race. A Christian doesn’t run the race Paul has in mind here in order to get to heaven. He is only in this race because he IS a Christian and has already been given an inheritance in heaven. He is running to win the prize of the Victor’s Crown; the reward given for those who exercise themselves unto godliness, compete according to the rules of God’s Word and steward their bodies with self-control.

But sadly, many people are either not in the race at all as unbelievers, or else as carnal believers they are running the wrong race...that is the rat race of the world. And one day they are going to wake up to the sad fact they have run in vain.

There was a world-class woman runner who was invited to compete in a road race in Connecticut. On the morning of the race, she drove from New York City, following the directions or so she thought, given to her over the telephone. She got lost, stopped at a gas station, and asked for help. She knew that the race started in the parking lot of a shopping mall. The station attendant also knew of such a race scheduled just up the road and directed her there. When she arrived she was relieved to see in the parking lot a modest number of runners preparing to compete. Not as many as she'd anticipated; an easier race than she'd been led to expect. She hurried to the registration desk,

⁷ James Kennedy, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Ft. Lauderdale Florida, March 19, 1978

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announced herself, and was surprised by the race officials' excitement at having so renowned an athlete show up for their race. No, they had no record of her entry, but if she'd hurry and put on this number, she could just make it before the gun goes off. She ran and, naturally, she won easily, some four minutes ahead of the first male runner in second place. Only after the race, when there was no envelope containing her sizable prize and performance money, did she confirm that the event she'd run was not the race to which she'd been invited. That race was being held several miles farther up the road in another town. She'd gone to the wrong starting line, run the wrong course, and missed her chance to win a valuable prize.”⁸

Not only is it possible to run the wrong race, it is also possible to be disqualified. Paul said he himself was concerned that even after he had preached to others, that he himself might be disqualified for the prize. David Lowry comments here saying, “Here Paul was not addressing the issue of salvation, nor for that matter was even the prize specifically in mind. Rather he seemed concerned with continuance in the race. Like the brother who had indulged in immorality (1 Cor. 5:1-5), Paul’s life could be cut short by the disciplinary disapproval of God. God had disciplined in the past (10:6-10), was disciplining in the present (11:30-32) and would discipline in the immediate future (5:5). Paul was concerned that some might not be able to say with him one day, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race” (2 Tim. 4:7) but would find themselves cut off in the midst of the contest by the disciplinary action of God”.⁹

If Paul was concerned about disqualification, I dare say we should be even more alert to this and apply his race method to our own life. What was his method?

Phil. 3:12-14 “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I **press on** to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers, I **do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it**. But one thing I do: **Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead**, 14 I **press on toward the goal to win the prize** for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

While the Christian Life is a race, it is not a sprint, it’s a marathon. And as such that means we must have a proper pace; we must strip down to simplicity; and we must run with endurance by remembering those who have been examples to us in the past and looking forward to the reality of the finish line of Heaven.

Heb. 12:1 encourages us saying “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

This past week, that great cloud of witnesses was expanded with the arrival home of Billy Graham. He’s there now; he made it; his race is over, but he has left us such a great example of endurance and competing for the prize. Let us remember him this week and let us fix our eyes on the same Jesus who authored and perfected Billy Graham’s faith and ours; Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. In closing, Paul’s “Four Rs” , Reality-Rights-Reward-Race, summarize for us what the martyred missionary Jim Elliot saw and who said so eloquently:

“He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

⁸ D. Bruce Lockerbie; *Thinking And Acting Like A Christian*; p. 52

⁹ David K. Lowry; *1 Corinthians; The Bible Knowledge Commentary- An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty*; 1983; SP Publications (p.525)