

# A COMMENTARY ON THE APOSTLE PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

According to the Homilies of St. John Chrysostom and other Fathers of the Church

by  
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## Chapter Nine

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## CHAPTER NINE

### The Extra Mile

BACKGROUND: Paul's critics in Corinth were suspicious of the fact that he accepted no compensation for his work there (see 2 Cor 11:7-12 & 12:11-13). They implied that perhaps his refusal to do so indicated that he was not really authorized to teach the Gospel. He now answers the questions thus raised: (1) Did he have a right, according to scriptural criterion, to be paid for the work he did in the course of his ministry? (2) If so, why would he refuse it?

**9:1-2. *Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? If I am not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you. For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.*** Paul had no master to whom he owed allegiance and labor other than the Lord. He was not one of the original twelve apostles, but he was called by Christ, Who appeared to him while he was on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:10-16 & 1 Cor 15:8). He had proved himself capable of teaching and bringing others to the Lord by those he had converted in Corinth, truly accomplishing the work of an Apostle among them.

**9:3-4. *My defense to those who examine me is this: Do we have no right to eat and drink?*** Since he fulfilled the essential qualifications of and was doing the work of an Apostle (Acts 1:21-22), he was entitled to be supported by the Christian community.

**9:5-6. *Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working?*** Paul and Barnabas were not married, but if they were, or if (as the original Greek text can be translated) a sister in-the-Lord were to accompany them, to help with the ministry, they were entitled to her support also. (Note: Peter (Mt 8:14) and at least some of the other Apostles were married. Clement of Alexandria wrote that Philip was married, and Eusebius intimated that they were all married.<sup>1</sup>) *Brothers of the Lord* refers to Joseph's children by his wife who had died (Mt 13:55), not by Mary, the Theotokos (Mother of God), who gave birth to no child other than Jesus.

**9:7. *Who ever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock?*** Paul offers some examples to illustrate the point: a soldier's needs are provided for by those he serves; a farmer receives some of the harvest; and a shepherd receives some of the milk of the flock. Note the inference: an Apostle (Bishop, Priest) is like a soldier in that he is a part of the Lord's army to fight evil, like a farmer in that he plants churches, and like a shepherd in that he guides and guards his congregation.

**9:8-12. *Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also? For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain." Is it oxen God is concerned about? Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? If others are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more? Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ.*** According to divine command (Deut 25:4), an ox should be able to eat of the grain it treads. As it would be unfair to muzzle a threshing ox, not allowing him to eat, it is unfair to deprive a hard-working man of his just wages. Likewise, the needs of those who do the work of the Lord should be recognized and their work

recompensed. A plowman begins the cycle of work (with planting); a thresher completes the harvest (with gathering). Both have a right to expect to profit from their work. Both he who first plants the seed of faith in the Lord in a man's heart and he who guides him to a more mature faith deserve to have their efforts rewarded (Mt 10:10, Lk 10:7).

The teacher ought to enjoy the returns of his labors.

Chrysostom<sup>2</sup>

**9:13-15.** *Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel. But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void.* Just as the priests of the Jewish temple and their families were allowed to take of the offerings brought to the temple for their personal use (see Numbers 18:21), Paul was entitled to have his needs provided for. Because his love for Jesus Christ was so great, however, he declined that support so as not to hinder the Gospel in any way—not wanting anyone to be able to say that the work he did was just a job to him.

**9:16-18.** *For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship. What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel.* Having been commissioned by Christ, Paul must preach the Gospel (Mt 28:19-20). He is also compelled to do so by an inner zeal which pushes him constantly onward. He goes further, however, in laboring without pay, for the satisfaction of knowing that he did more than just what was expected. He also wanted to set a good example in order to prevent false teachers from pretending to do God's work for material gain.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:** (a). How can we go “the extra mile” in our walk with God?

**9:19.** *For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more;* Paul was a tentmaker, so was able to support himself (Acts 18:3). He was also willing to live in a very simple manner (1 Cor 4:10-13). Therefore, he was obligated to no-one. But he willingly made himself a servant to all in order to bring souls to Christ.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:** (b). Paul truly tried to follow Christ's example in this and other precepts. Is it possible to pursue this lifestyle today?

**9:20-22.** *...and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.* Paul was born a Jew, but as a Christian he was no longer bound by the legalisms of the Mosaic Law. However, he made good use of his heritage, following Jewish teachings and customs insofar as they did not conflict with the Gospel in order to maintain his relationship with Jews, to put himself in a position from which he might lead them to Christ. He also followed the customs of the Gentiles which did not conflict with the Christ-like life for the same reason. Further, with those still immature in faith he was tolerant, while trying to nurture them. He

thus used every means available to him to bring as many people as possible from all walks of life to Christ.

Note the words: "...that I might by all means save some." Those who take biblical verses out of context might misinterpret this verse to mean that Paul taught that people could find salvation through him. Nothing is farther from the truth. He claimed to "save" only by bringing souls to Christ. In like manner, all Biblical verses and prayers and hymns of the Church must be understood in the context in which they were written. When we pray to those whom, we have good reason to believe, have gone beyond this life to God's Kingdom (including the Theotokos and the Saints: the Church Triumphant), we ask only, but importantly, that they pray with us and for us to God for His mercy, as we ask for prayers from our friends around us in this life (the Church Militant: those still struggling through this life trying to live by faith).

...the Saints take part in the governing of the Church of Christ on earth, and therefore it is natural and proper to appeal to them with prayers, asking their intercession before Christ, with Whom they reign.<sup>3</sup> (See 1 Cor 6:2-3, Rev 20:4.)

We know, however, that only God (through His Son) can save us.

**9:23. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be a partaker of it with you.** Those who believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ and live accordingly will share eternity with God in His Kingdom. Paul does the work of the Lord with that goal in mind.

**9:24. Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.** This does not mean that only he who has surpassed all others in spiritual accomplishments will enter the Kingdom, but that the Christ-like life should be pursued with the fervor that would be required if that were the case. How far this word picture is from that painted by those who take Paul's words (in Romans 10:9) out of context, teaching that one's works have nothing to do with salvation: that all one need do to be "saved" is profess belief, with absolute assurance of eternity with God from that point on.

**9:25. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.** When an athlete is in training in preparation for the running of an important race, he withdraws from the world to concentrate on his goal. He is taught to use moderation in his eating, drinking and social activities in order to funnel all of his energies into the task at hand and to train with all his might. He goes to these great lengths to win a crown that is perishable. This was a very apt analogy for the Corinthians because of their familiarity with the Isthmian games, held every three years in Corinth, which were considered second only to the Olympics and drew immense crowds. "To win was to be immortalized by the Greek public."<sup>4</sup>

We who call ourselves Christians are participating in a race in which those who cross the finish line (Mk 13:13) will receive an imperishable crown from God. We must therefore prepare ourselves and concentrate on our goal with even greater fervor than the most ambitious athlete. (Read Heb 12:1-4, 2 Tim 4:6-8, Jas 1:12, 2:14-17, 1 Pet 5:1-4, Rev 2:10-11.)

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:** (c). What would a review of our life indicate as to where we expend the greater effort: in our worldly affairs or in our spiritual walk with Christ?

**9:26-27. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.** Paul practiced what he preached. He was very actively involved in the struggle himself, fighting against the devil, who tries to dissuade every Christian from the goal.

A Protestant interpretation of these verses, reflecting the theology of “salvation by faith alone,” says: “His own salvation is not in question but his reward for acceptable service.”<sup>5</sup> The Orthodox interpretation is that a Christian’s faith, or lack thereof, as shown by his works (the overall picture of his life), will be revealed on Judgment Day. (See this study for 1 Cor 3:12-15, and 10:6-10).

If Paul felt absolutely confident of his salvation at the moment, he would not sound so adamant about the need to press on to win the race, nor would he be so concerned about his reward. Wouldn’t being in Heaven be glorious enough in itself (Ps 84:10)? Why would he struggle so and refer to the *terror of the Lord* (2 Cor 5:11) with regard to getting a higher reward? Why would he write about being “disqualified” if he did not know that there is always an element of doubt about our salvation until our lives are over and it is certain that we have endured to the end (Mt 24:13)?

There *are* levels of union with God (see this study for 1 Cor 2:10-13; 3:8,12-15; & 15:39-41). But here Paul was talking about the need to continue throughout life to do God’s work, because that is what one who has true faith would do, as opposed to one who thinks he need only profess belief in Jesus Christ but continue to live the type of life he likes—or as opposed to one who takes part in the struggle to a certain point and then rests on his laurels, thinking he had “done enough.” No one can ever do enough to earn salvation. Salvation cannot be earned or purchased but comes through demonstrated faith that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah, Lord of our lives. In the end, we will see that we have judged ourselves, by the way we lived (see this study for 1 Cor 6:2-3).

...just as tools without the workman and the workman without tools are unable to do anything...neither is faith without the commandments, nor the fulfillment of the commandments without faith able to renew and re-create us. SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN<sup>6</sup>

In his First Apology to the Emperor Titus Aelius Adrianus Antonius Pius Augustus Caesar, on behalf of those who were being unjustly persecuted merely because they called themselves Christians, Justin wrote the following in explaining why they would not deny their Christianity to avoid punishment:

...it is in our power, when we are examined, to deny that we are Christians; but we would not live by telling a lie. For, impelled by the desire of the eternal and pure life, we seek the abode that is with God, the Father and Creator of all, and hasten to confess our faith, *persuaded and convinced as we are that they who have proved to God by their works that they followed Him, and loved to abide with Him where there is no sin to cause disturbance, can obtain these things.* This then, to speak briefly, is what we expect and have learned from Christ, and teach.

...and we have been taught, and are convinced, and do believe, that He accepts those only who imitate the excellences which reside in Him, temperance, and justice, and philanthropy, and as many virtues as are peculiar to a God who is called by no proper name.

...and when you hear that we look for a kingdom, you suppose, without making any inquiry, that we speak of a human kingdom; whereas we speak of that which is with God, as appears also from the confession of their faith made by those who are charged with being Christians, though they know that death is the punishment awarded to him who so confesses. For if we looked for a human

kingdom, we should also deny our Christ, that we might not be slain; and we should strive to escape detection, that we might obtain what we expect. But since our thoughts are not fixed on the present, we are not concerned when men cut us off...

...and more than all other men are we your helpers and allies in promoting peace, seeing that we hold this view, that it is alike impossible for the wicked, the covetous, the conspirator, and for the virtuous, to escape the notice of God, and that each man goes to everlasting punishment or salvation according to the value of his actions.”<sup>7</sup>

Only when Paul saw the end of his life at hand did he display confidence in his own salvation, because he knew his struggle was almost over (2 Tim 4:6-8).

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

**(a). How can we go “the extra mile” in our walk with God?** Mt 5:38-48 offers examples. Willingness to do more than just what is necessary to achieve one’s goal in any area shows love, which is the goal of the Christian life (Jn 15:9-12). God is love (1 Jn 4:8). He created man out of His love and desire to share with him the wonders of Creation. In return, He asks only love, which we extend to Him in outreach to others (Mt 25:31-46). To do only that which one thinks he must do for salvation is legalistic and devoid of love.

**(b). Paul truly tried to follow Christ’s example in this and other precepts. Is it possible to pursue this lifestyle today?** Everyone in every age is called to try to follow Christ’s example in all things (read Phil 2:5-8). Our modern world presents unique challenges to the Christ-like lifestyle, but so has every age. Each of us has different strengths, talents, opportunities, and responsibilities. God asks only that we do the best we can in the circumstances in which we find ourselves—but with Him, *all things are possible* (Mt 19:26).

**(c). What would a review of our life indicate as to where we expend the greater effort: in our worldly affairs or in our spiritual walk with Christ?** All that is required for salvation is to continually try to show God we believe that He exists and that we have faith in His promises, by trying to live a Christ-like life. But trying means making a sincere effort—with all our might. The greater effort should of course be for that which is eternal, rather than for that which is passing.

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<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, p.140.

<sup>2</sup> Schaff, “Homily XXI,” Vol. XII, p.21.

<sup>3</sup> Averky, *The Apocalypse of St. John: an Orthodox Commentary*, p.198.

<sup>4</sup> D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer, A.M. Stibbs, D.J. Wiseman, *The New Bible Commentary: Rev.*, p.1063.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Golitzin, “Life, ‘Times and Theology,’” *St. Symeon the New Theologian: On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses*. Vol. 3: p.66.

<sup>7</sup> Roberts and Donaldson, “The First Apology of Justin,” Vol. I, p.165.