

YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX

1 Corinthians 9:3-14

INTRODUCTION: Before we look at what the Bible teaches about supporting full-time church workers, there are some things you must know about our family's personal view of finances as it pertains to supporting us for fulltime ministry:

1. We will *never* ask the congregation for money.
2. Our financial needs will be obtained through prayer, not prodding or manipulating Christians. If the money runs out, I will trust God to provide and if He does not do so, I will follow the example of the apostle Paul and work a regular part-time or fulltime job to avoid causing a hindrance to the gospel and to provide for the material needs of my family [Acts 18:3; 1 Cor. 9:12; 1 Tim. 5:8].
3. If God wants us to be supported for fulltime church work, He *will* direct His people to give and we will prosper enough to serve fulltime. If God does not direct His people to give, we will not succeed. If God is not with us, we will not succeed spiritually and *should not* succeed materially.
4. We will contract no new debt. For us, debt only prevents us from using the resources that God has given us to further His gospel. For example, if our car is beyond repair, we either purchase another one outright with the money that we already have in savings or pray and ask God to provide us one if we cannot afford to pay for it outright. Through prayer, God will help us to carry out the needs of this ministry to the Lord and act according to the direction that He gives us in His word.
5. We believe that an elder that works hard at preaching and teaching is worthy of his wages [1 Tim. 5:17-18]. Fulltime church workers should be afforded that which is required to live with dignity and to demonstrate that the Lord is gracious to supply the needs of His servants. To neglect their welfare would give excuse for the ungodly to bring unjust accusations against the Lord that He is either uncaring or unable to meet the needs of His servants. Our family shall not be given so much as to waste the Lord's resources, acquire luxury, or live above those who so graciously give to the Lord's work. Our view is that to seek wealth and luxury in the ministry is to deny the ministry [1 Tim. 3:3 – "*free from the love of money*"; Titus 1:7 – "*not fond of sordid gain*"; 1 Peter 5:2 – "*shepherd the flock of God . . . not for sordid gain*"].
6. Our goal as a family is not to get attention to ourselves in the cause of the Great Commission, but to be faithful and obedient stewards only by the grace that is given to us. We desire that our only vision be the crucified, risen, and exalted Christ. Paul Washer probably summed up our view of ministry support better than any other when he said this, "*The more we depend upon the arm of the flesh, the less we are going to see of the power of God*"¹

¹ Paul Washer, Genesis-Revelation TV Show: *Decisional Regeneration: Paul Washer Interview*: @ 6 minutes, 13 seconds found at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaKI4Fj4l80&feature=player_embedded#

In light of all I have said regarding fulltime support for my family, I am obligated by God to teach this text because (1) we are going through 1st Corinthians verse by verse and we have now arrived at this passage so we have to deal with it and (2) we are committing to teaching the *entire* message of the Bible and working hard to correctly understand it because all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Therefore, we have to deal with the subject of supporting fulltime church workers² because it's part of Scripture and since training in the Scriptures is for the purpose of preparing us for all good works, we need to learn how to do *this* good work. I am uncomfortable with teaching about supporting fulltime church workers because (1) I am one and (2) it seems as if all that ministries do these days is ask for money. That being the case, I realize that any comments that I make while teaching on money can be either be genuinely misunderstood or purposefully twisted (2 Peter 3:16). Such is the danger of being a preacher these days; especially in America. However, Paul said to the elders at Ephesus that he was *never* afraid to proclaim to them the whole counsel of God and as a man of God, I must have the same conviction (Acts 20:27). So I will teach about supporting fulltime church workers not as a way to get any money from you, but to teach *God's* truth about this so that you can know how to be obedient to His word. His mind about this subject is revealed in 1 Corinthians 9:3-14, and in that text we will learn that financial support of fulltime church workers is a right (verses 3-6), it's expected (verse 7), it's God's Law (verses 8-11), it's given to other faithful church workers (verse 12), it's a universal pattern (verse 13), and it is God-ordained (verse 14).

TEACHING AND APPLICATION

As we journey into the heart of 1 Corinthians 9, it is important to note that this chapter is a parenthetical remark designed to show you how he avoids hurting weaker Christians. Paul's main subject started in chapter 8 where he discussed not being a stumbling block to less mature Christians by eating food sacrificed to idols, even though Christians have every right to eat that type of food (cf. 1 Cor. 8:9). Paul continues with the same idea in chapter 9 where he gives an example of how fulltime workers like him have a right to be financially supported, but that he is going to waive his "right" to such support so that he will not be a stumbling block to some in the Corinthian Church and thus hinder the gospel (9:12b, 15). When we get into chapter 10, we'll see that Paul returns to the subject of offending weaker brethren, "*Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*"³² *Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God*" (1 Corinthians 10:31-32). Thus, Paul's teaching in chapter 9 is for the purpose of showing that even though he had a right to financial support, he didn't take it so as to avoid offending the weaker brethren. Nevertheless, we turn to point number one, where we learn that supporting a fulltime church worker is a right.

I. Support is a Right (verses 3-6).

² When I use the phrase "fulltime church workers" I am referring exclusively to missionaries, church planters, evangelists, and in some cases, elders. Paul encouraged the Ephesian elders to look at his own example of working a regular job so as to give to the work of the Lord (cf. Acts 20:33-35). However, see 1st Timothy 5:17-18 for Paul's teaching regarding a Christian's freedom to financially support elders that have certain characteristics.

In verses 3-4, Paul lays out his defense against those who want to call into question his rights to financial and material support as an apostle. He says, “*Do we not have a right to eat and drink?*” In other words, as a minister of the gospel, do I have a right to expect that when I minister to you that I at least have food and drink provided to me? After all, how would Paul get the much needed strength and energy to travel, preach, and teach if his material needs weren’t provided for by God through God’s people? This is why he says elsewhere in Galatians 6:6, “*The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him.*”

He states in verse 5, “*Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?*” Paul says, don’t I have a right to get married to a Christian woman and have her minister beside me, just like the rest of the apostles such as Peter and Jesus’ half brothers?³ Paul was probably a widower, but nevertheless, if he wanted, he was fully within his rights as an apostle to get married (1 Cor. 7:39-40). This sounds like a no-brainer to us, but that’s because most of you do not come from Roman Catholic background. In the early parts of the Protestant Reformation, people gasped when they heard that Luther, Calvin, and other Reformers were getting married, for those that are priests in the Roman Catholic Church are required to be celibate. On a slightly different subject, I will offer what Dr. John MacArthur says about verse 5 in his commentary,

I believe that such a verse supports the principle of paying pastors, evangelists, missionaries, and other such Christian workers enough so that their wives do not have to work; so they can have more time to be with their husbands in the ministry.⁴

He goes on to say,

The verse can be applied to the principle of paying for the wife’s expenses when she travels with her husband in his ministry, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas. The term to take along (*peritago*) means ‘to carry about in one’s company.’ A wife’s support and companionship is especially helpful when the husband is ministering away from home. No doubt one of the contributing causes of divorce among ministers today is that many of them are not able to spend enough time with their wives and families. Obviously a wife with small children at home or with other such commitments is limited in the trips she can take. The point is that, when it is possible for her to go along, every effort should be made by the sponsoring group to pay her way. It is a question of the right attitude, the attitude of generosity in supporting the Lord’s full-time workers.⁵

I’ll let MacArthur’s comments stand without any additional commentary from me. Paul goes on to say in verse 6, “*Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working?*”

³ This just shows how wrongheaded mandatory celibacy is for *any* Christian, much less a fulltime church worker (1 Tim. 4:1-3).

⁴ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary on 1st Corinthians*, (Chicago, Ill: Moody Press, 1984), 201.

⁵ *Ibid*, 201-202.

Paul and Barnabas had just as much a right as any other apostle to be supported by the churches. Fulltime church workers ought to be supported, especially those that work hard at preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17-18).

II. Support is Expected (verse 7).

“Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat the fruit of it? Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock?”

Paul gives three illustrations to show us that paying worthy workers is expected. Soldiers don't work a regular job to pay for their own weapons, clothes, food, and ammunition and then go fight for their country in their off hours. How ridiculous would it be for them to serve at their own expense? (!) No, they are provided all that they need to live and fight successfully. Farmers do not work all day on the farm for free and then go work another job so that they can buy food from another farmer. No, they are compensated for the work they do and they get to “eat the fruit” produced from their own crop. Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:6, *“The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops.”* Neither do shepherds work for free. They take care of the flock and should expect at least some of the *“milk of the flock”* as payment for their services. Now, with those three illustrations in mind, how much more should it be expected for worthy church workers who are defending and increasing God's Kingdom to be supported so that they don't have to serve “at their own expense”?

III. Support is God's Law (verses 8-11).

*“I am not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does not the Law also say these things?”*⁹ *For it is written in the Law of Moses, “YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING.” God is not concerned about oxen, is He?”*

Paul says that church workers being financially and materially supported for their labor is not only “according to human judgment”, but notes that *“the Law also says these things”*. The standard assumed by men that workers are to be paid only makes sense because God's standards said so first. Paul quotes from the Law of Moses at Deuteronomy 25:4 which states, *“You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing.”* Oxen were allowed to eat as they worked in the field. That was their “payment”. Those oxen getting “paid” was an Old Testament illustration to show us what ought to happen for church workers in the New Testament.

Paul's comment *“God is not concerned about oxen, is He?”* is not to show that God doesn't care about animals. The Lord feeds the birds of the sky and gives land animals their food (Job 38:41; Psalm 147:9). God told Jonah, *“Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?”* Yes, God cares for animals. Jesus even said, *“Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. . . .”* (Matt. 6:26). But notice the next phrase at the end of

verse 26, “*Are you not worth much more than they?*” As Jesus’ last comment in verse 26 says, God takes care of the animals but people are “worth much more than [the animals]”. So Paul’s point is that if God is concerned that oxen be “paid” for their work, how much more important is it that fulltime church workers be compensated for theirs?

Paul says in verses 10-11 that God was speaking on behalf of men in Deuteronomy 25:4, “*Or is He speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher to thresh in hope of sharing the crops.*” Men ought to be able to earn their living from their labor. He goes on in verse 11, “*If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?*” If men working for other men are paid for producing material goods, how much more should it be if men work for God to produce *spiritual* goods in men? The Lord provides spiritual rewards for His preachers, but He uses His people to provide material rewards and provide it lovingly and generously as if they were giving it to Him. Paul says that those who work hard at preaching and teaching are worthy of “double-honor” (1 Tim. 5:17). MacArthur gets it right when he says this,

Obviously, we should give our money only to ministries that are biblically sound and responsible. Every appeal made in the Lord’s name does not deserve the support of the Lord’s people. Being wise in our giving is part of our stewardship. But when we give to a servant who is worthy, we should give happily, generously, and trustingly.⁶

The word “if” (*ie* + indicative verb in Greek) indicates something that is assumed to be true. In other words, if genuine spiritual ministry has occurred (and it has in Paul’s case) it is not too much to get “*material things from you*”. Some churches may not be able to support a fulltime church worker because of a lack of people and/or because of financial hardship. However, the churches in Macedonia⁷ that financially supported Paul’s missionary activity were dreadfully poor, yet they not only supported him but also helped other churches,

*Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia,² that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.³ For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord,⁴ begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints,⁵ and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. (2 Corinthians 8:1-5 - notice at the end of verse 5 that their giving of themselves to God first resulted in their financial support of God’s work second. Their attitude and practice in giving is a model for *all* Christians.).*

When you give to worthy church workers you are giving to the Lord’s work. Even the very strength and ability you have to work with your own hands so that you can give to God’s workmen, is *itself* a gift from God. *Everything* that you have is a gift from God! Truly, as the Scripture says, “*His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness*” (2 Peter 1:3). And as Paul said later referring to all believers, that God supplies all our “*needs according to His riches and glory in Christ Jesus*” (Phil. 4:19). Because God is so generous to

⁶ Ibid., 203.

⁷ Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, etc. Acts 16:11-17:13.

His children, we should reflect that generous nature, *“he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully”* (2 Corinthians 9:6). Those who give generously to the work of the Lord will be blessed and not only that, but it is imperative that we be generous to those fulltime workers who labor in preaching and teaching so that the gospel may go forth in our world.

IV. Support is Given to Others (verse 12).

“If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.”

The fourth reason why Paul says that a laborer is worthy of his wage is because other church workers were already being supported by the Corinthian church, *“If others share the right over you, do we not more?”* As the founder of the Corinthian Church, Paul had a more of a right to financial support more than any other man, but he did not *“use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.”* The word “endure” (Gk. *stego*) means “to bear up under”. Paul said that he was willing to waive his right to financial support to avoid causing a hindrance to the gospel in Corinth. Paul says that he bears up under all difficult situations if necessary so that the gospel may be preached. His life was a pattern of uncomplaining self-denial (2 Tim. 2:10). He even said in 2 Corinthians 12:10, *“Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”* Earlier in his ministry he worked as a tent-maker (Acts 18:3) to support himself as an itinerant missionary and he could say the same thing to the Corinthians that he said to the Ephesian pastors, *“You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me.”* (Acts 20:34; 2 Thess. 3:8).

Sometimes it is wise for a fulltime church worker to avoid taking funds from those they are ministering to. Street preaching is a great example. I have had people walk up and try to hand me a \$20 dollar bill while I was in the middle of preaching. I kindly refuse the money, but sometimes they get offended. But it is the better part of wisdom to avoid taking money in such circumstances. You may say, “Why? Maybe it’s just their way of showing appreciation for what you are doing.” First, given the context, you don’t know what their intention is when they give you the money. They might try to use it against you in some way to malign the truth. Since you can’t be sure in that context, it’s better to give them your ministry card and if they want to support you in some way, they have your contact information. Second, as said earlier, the *last* thing a bunch of lost people need to see is a street preacher taking cash right there on the spot since any of them can turn on the television and see false preachers begging for money all day long or go to any number of churches on Sunday morning that will ask for money. In the same way, even though he had the right, Paul refused support from the Corinthians so that they couldn’t use it against him and thus cause a hindrance to the gospel. After all, some of them were already calling into question whether he was a legitimate apostle. Thus, he didn’t want to run the risk of clouding the gospel message.

In our modern context, it is wise for those working in the ministry to either work a secular job to support themselves until a congregation or group of congregations can get

established enough to free them up for fulltime church work or they can have a group of sending churches or individual Christians to support them. The bottom line is this: Fulltime church workers must avoid giving any unnecessary offense in the preaching of the gospel, especially in the area of support. This means that they do not ask for money or charge a fee for their work, but accept whatever provision that comes from the Lord's hands (2 Cor. 2:17; 1 Tim. 3:3; 6:3-5; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:2). The gospel is offensive enough without our adding to it, and asking people to give their money while at the same time calling them to come to Christ is *highly* offensive. Such behavior is the mark of a false teacher (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2; Tit. 1:10-11; 1 Peter 5:2-3).

V. Support is a Universal Pattern (verse 13).

“Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar?”

The fifth reason Paul says that workers need to be supported is because it is a universal pattern grounded in the Old Testament priesthood. Those who “*perform sacred services*” refers to the Old Testament priests working under the old economy. Old Testament priests were partially supported by the Israelites giving them a tenth of their crops and animals including the sacrifices that they offered on behalf of the people in the temple. This is why Paul said that “*those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar*” (cf. Num. 18:8-24). Since their way of life was to “attend regularly” to the service of God in the temple, they needed to be at least partially supported.⁸ Paul says that if God saw fit to have His old covenant priests cared for, how much more should it be so with a worthy New Testament church worker?

VI. Support is God Ordained (verse 14).

“So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.”

Finally, Paul says that worthy men of God should be supported for fulltime work because Jesus ordained it. Jesus clearly taught that those who proclaim the gospel are to get their living from the gospel. It couldn't get much plainer than that. Verse 14 is either referring to Jesus' teaching in His earthly ministry (Luke 10:7 – “*for the laborer is worthy of his wages.*”) or Paul was personally given this revelation by Jesus Himself.

What about Elders?

Paul says the following about elders/pastors/overseers in 1st Timothy 5:17-18, “*The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.*”¹⁸ *For the Scripture says, “YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING,” and “The laborer is worthy of his wages.”* The phrase

⁸ Cf. Luke 1:8-10. It appears that Levitical priest worked in the temple on rotation. That is, they were not serving full-time year round, but when not working their rotation in the temple, they worked the land (cf. Numbers 13:1-5; Joshua 21:1-42).

“double honor” (Gk., *diples times*) in verse 17 means that the elders that work hard at preaching and teaching are worthy to receive respect and something beyond mere respect; they were worthy of financial support or an honorarium. This is further confirmed in verse 18 where Paul clearly says that the “*laborer is worthy of his wages.*” The word “wage” (Gk., *misthos*) means “pay, wages, reward” – i.e., financial support. However, when you take Acts 20:33-35 together with 1st Timothy 5:17-18, this suggests that even those elders that are worthy of double honor (financial support) should be willing to work some secular vocation if necessary, such as during times of economic depression, in third-world countries that are poverty-stricken, in very small churches, etc. Taking all these passages together, Jesus commanded that those who preach the gospel (evangelists, missionaries/church planters) should make their living from the gospel (Luke 10:7). Paul, using the illustration in 1 Cor. 9 applied this same principle to apostles and later he finally applies it to certain elders that meet the qualifications that we just looked at in 1st Timothy 5:17-18. Consider this appropriate illustration,

Suppose a man trained as a physician and moved to a remote part of some third world country where there were no doctors for a hundred miles. Yet, this doctor had the conviction that it would be wrong to make his living as a doctor, and instead got a job, there as a ditch digger. All day long people would come to him, begging for medical aid, but he would have to turn them away, explaining that he had a secular job to do, and to come back that night after he had put his kids in the bed. This scenario is ludicrous, but that is the situation that exists in some circumstances where a Christian worker insists on working a secular job, turning down ministry opportunities and pleas for help. Similarly, elders who work full-time secular jobs and who are the kind of husband and father that god desires will not have much time left over for Bible study nor ministry to the church. Yet, the Bible and the church are far too important to be relegated to mere hobby status! See Acts 6:1-2. Just to properly understand and teach the Bible requires hours upon hours of diligent study and preparation. Factor in the time needed to teach those studies and to counsel people needing advice and at least a part-time ministry is easily created. Paul paid his own way where necessary, but when the funds were available, he stopped tent-making and ministered.⁹

CONCLUSION

In summary, the Lord commands His people to support church workers who work hard at church planting, evangelism, and preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17-18; 1 Cor. 9:14). However, those who minister the gospel are not obligated to accept financial support; they have a right to waive support if they think that it's in the best interests of the gospel to do so. Again, this just demonstrates that while Christians are obligated to financially support worthy workers; under certain circumstances, when it comes to financial support for fulltime ministry, it's not always a good idea to take money from people if you are the one receiving it. This was Paul's philosophy, and some preachers would do well to heed Paul's example so that the gospel of God's free grace will be proclaimed without hindrance. Amen, let it be Lord Jesus!

Questions:

⁹ Steve Atkerson, *The Practice of the Early Church*, (Atlanta, GA: NTRF, 2006), 99.

1. Based upon 1st Corinthians 9:1-14, what “right” does every apostle (read = church planter/missionary) have? (financial support)
2. What is implied about Paul and Barnabas in 1 Corinthians 9:6? (cf. 9:12a, 15, Acts 20:34; 2 Thess. 3:7-9)
3. What were the three examples Paul used in 1 Corinthians 9:7 to illustrate his point about an apostle’s right to financial support? (Soldier, vineyard keeper, shepherd).
4. Looking at 1st Corinthians 9:9, what is the answer to Paul’s question? (cf. 9:10a).
5. Why is the answer “yes”? (cf. 9:10b)
6. What else is implied about Paul and Barnabas in 9:12?
7. What Old Testament example does Paul use in 1st Corinthians 9:13?
8. According to 1st Corinthians 9:14, what has the Lord “commanded”? (cf. Eccles. 3:13; Matt. 10:9-11; Lk. 10:7).
9. Why did Paul refuse financial support from the Corinthian Church? (cf. 1 Cor. 9:15-18)
10. If Paul did not write chapter 9 in hopes that the Corinthian Church would support him, why did he write what he did?
11. According to 1 Timothy 5:17-18, what type of elder is worthy of double-honor?
12. What is “double honor” in 1st Timothy 5:17?
13. How do we reconcile what Paul says in 1st Timothy 5:17-18 about certain types of elders with the example that he suggests to them in Acts 20:33-35?