

1 CORINTHIANS (PART 10) ▪ CHAPTER 9  
GETTING THE PRIZE  
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<sup>23</sup> Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with *you*. <sup>24</sup> 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*. <sup>25</sup> 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*. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air. <sup>27</sup> But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (1 Cor. 9)

## INTRODUCTION

**W**e know all about rights and freedoms. Or we think we do. At least we talk about them a lot. We have our rights and freedoms documented: everything from *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, to *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, to the *U.S. Constitution* and its *Bill of Rights*. And even those who've perhaps never even read one of these documents have been trained by our culture to cry out "It's my right" and "freedom." The latter frequently understood in the same manner as the Rolling Stones song *I'm Free*: "I'm free to do what I want any old time." Contrary to the rhetoric of our political messiahs, "rights" and "freedoms" are only ultimately bestowed by God as his gift. People can talk about rights and freedoms all they want. Politicians can make all kinds of promises. But as long as there is sin to contend with, man can only know real freedom as God's gift by means of the gospel. All true lasting rights and freedoms are a product of this.

But how are we to use our rights and freedoms? Have we as God's people who live in a culture that has been blessed by the greatest degree of freedom yet known in history given this much thought? We know that freedom wrongly understood is simply another word for chaos. And rights gone wrong are simply another word for opportunism. And we see lots of ugly fruits from these perversions in our culture as we quickly are losing real rights and freedoms. But if the church is to be the light of the world, have we learned how to handle our rights and freedoms – the ones that God has bestowed upon us directly through the gospel and as fruits born in our culture? Do we know how to be light to the world in this area? How can we tell?

## THE RESULTS

Well Paul would say that we demonstrate that we know how to handle our rights and freedoms if we exhibit athletic-like self-discipline for the sake of the gospel of Christ (vv. 26, 27). This is how we are to run in such a way as to obtain the prize (v. 24). Paul's concern *here* is not that the Corinthians put forth a great effort, nor does his point lie in the fact that "only *one* gets the prize" (as if the Christian life were a competition of some sort). These things are not Paul's point. Paul is speaking to the Corinthians about the need *for self-control* in order to win. An athlete must deny himself any number of his legitimate rights and freedoms in order to secure the prize.

Don't be misled by Paul's single competitor illustrations of running and boxing. The immediate context and the whole letter show us that his concern is a corporate matter that depends upon each person getting with the program (v. 23 cf. 1:10; 3:3). The church together ought to share the same goal and exercise their rights and freedoms in such discipline that it's *effect* is like one of those eight men rowing teams where each member is pulling for the same goal. Perhaps a better illustration is an America's Cup catamaran racing team where you have a crew sailing a ship – and everyone is doing something different as far as tasks go, but all of them are focused on a single goal and exercise their rights and freedoms as disciplined sportsmen for the sake of winning the cup.

## LEADERSHIP

One of the puzzles of the letters to the Corinthians is where are the elders? Why aren't they addressed? What's going on? It's clear that they had leadership problems of some sort in this church, for Paul is constantly having to deal with the fact that they look at him with a jaundiced eye (e.g. 4:3). He's doing so in this very section (v. 3). It is clear from the tone and content of this letter that the Corinthians had several problems with Paul's apostleship and consequent authority. First they complained about Paul's message and methods (Ch. 1-4), and here the problem is that Paul does not charge for his services (vv. 4-6). Instead of being filled with gratitude at Paul's sacrifice for them, they used this fact against Paul and his authority. It appears they were now reasoning that Paul worked with his hands because he *lacked* rights, not that he had *renounced* rights. This was a really big issue for the Corinthians, because we see it brought up by Paul again extensively in his next letter to them (2 Cor. 11:7; 12:13). But Paul uses this occasion to answer his critics as well as to further unpack the principles taught in chapter 8 concerning the proper use of knowledge in the church. Paul begins by asking two questions, which he expects his readers to answer in the affirmative. The answers to these questions show that Paul is entitled to certain rights, certain privileges, and certain liberties. Those two questions in verse 1 are the table of contents for this section. Paul teaches us the proper use of rights (vv. 4-18) and freedoms (vv. 19-23).

## THE PRIZE

The key to using our rights and freedoms properly then is to keep our eyes on the prize (v. 25). The prize is not something that is of only temporary value, but permanent: "an imperishable crown." Paul doesn't spell this out here, but it is one of the major thrusts of his letter (cf. Ch. 15). Paul's sights are set on nothing less than the complete renewal of all creation, including the conquest and abolition of death itself. This is the gospel. And so Paul warns the Corinthians (indirectly), not to lose sight of this goal and pettily cling to their rights and freedoms. The result could be disqualification (v. 27).

## WHAT ABOUT HTC?

Can we say that we are in a position to teach Colville and the world about rights and freedoms? Do we look like one of those well disciplined catamaran teams racing for the prize? Or do we look more like a bunch of hillbillies in a rubber raft flailing about and paddling according to our own undisciplined rights and freedoms? What does the gospel teach us about remedying this?