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Refusing to Use Your Freedom in Messiah 9: 15-27

Refusing to use your freedom in Messiah DIG: What are some of the reasons Paul provides for why he preaches the Good News? What are his rewards for doing this? Why did Paul give up some of his rights to preach the Good News? What does it mean to become "a slave to all?" What kind of language would you use today to get the same point across? Why is it so difficult for believers to give up their rights? What are some of these rights? What point is Paul making by comparing the life of a believer to a race?

REFLECT: Paul was not as concerned with his method of evangelism as with the message he was proclaiming. How can you apply his thinking to the way you share the Good News about Yeshua today? Think about the times you tried to witness to people. What have you learned in those experiences that you can share with others? What behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs hinder a believer's witness? When was the last time someone sacrificed his or her own needs to help you? What are you willing to give up to win more people to Messiah?

With all kinds of people, both Jews and Gentiles, I have become all kinds of things,
so that in all kinds of circumstances I might save at least some of them.

Paul now picks up where **he** left off in **9:12b, "we put up with all kinds of things so as not to impede in any way the Good News about the Messiah." He** has not made use of any of **the rights** that **he** had just been talking about (see **Bo – Laying Aside Rights**). That is, **he** does not want to accept money from those to whom **he** preaches, nor is he giving all these arguments about financial support in order to convince **the Corinthians** that at this stage **they** should start supporting **him**. Rather, it is a matter of personal pride for **him**, as well as a matter of missionary principle, not to receive such money.[240]

Paul's restraint (9:15-18): Although **Paul** has **the right** to live from preaching **the Good News**, **he** does not; rather, **he** supports **himself** through **his** trade, **tentmaking (Acts 18:3). He** regards **his** keeping **himself** independent as its own reward, because it means that **he** can make **the Good News available free of charge** and not expose **himself** to the slightest risk of abusing **his right** to be supported by fellow believers.

But I have not made use of any of these rights (**to see link click Bo – Laying Aside Rights**)**. Paul** deals with the pride issue first. **Nor am I writing now to secure them for myself, for I would rather die than be deprived of my ground for boasting!** Then what motivates **him**? **For I can't boast merely because I proclaim the Good News – this I do from inner compulsion: woe is me if I don't proclaim the Good News! For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if I do it unwillingly, I still do it, simply because I've been entrusted with a job. So then, what is my reward? Just this: that in proclaiming the Good News I can make it available free of charge, without making use of the rights to which it entitles me (9:15-18).** Some people might not believe **the Good News** if they felt it might lead to financial obligations.

Paul's freedom (9:19-23): For although I am a free man (9:1), not bound to do anyone's bidding (7:22), I have voluntarily **made myself a slave to all.** In the following verses, **Paul** illustrates this principle. **He** says, in effect, that although **he** could behave in a selfish way that would make **him** feel natural and comfortable; **he** goes out of **his** way to empathize with, and serve **others** and **their** needs. **He** did this **in order to win as many people as possible** to trust **in Messiah** – **Paul's** central goal in life **(9:19).**

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, How awesome **You** are! What great **mercy** and grace **You** give those who love **You** by forgiving their **sins. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His mercy for those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us (Psalms 103:11-12).** Yet, **You** are also Holy so **You** cannot allow anyone into **Your** holy home of heaven who does not love **You** and trust in **Your Son** whom **You** sent as the atoning sacrifice to pay the price for our sins. **He who trusts in the Son has eternal life. He who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:36).***

*Eternity – a great thought for those who love **God** and will spend forever in heaven – but a horrifying thought for those who love themselves and will not be allowed*

into heaven, but will be separated from ***God*** *forever!* ***At the revelation of the Lord Yeshua from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, He will command judgment on those who do not know God and do not heed the Good News of our Lord Yeshua. They will pay the price of eternal ruin, away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His power (Second Thessalonians 1:7c-9).***

Let us do everything that we can to pray for and to lovingly and humbly persuade all peoples that ***You, God,*** *are the only way to heaven. Let us lay aside pride and be busy to do the most important of work – to pray for unsaved friends and family that they may choose to follow* ***You*** *and so be saved for all* ***eternity (Romans 10:9-10)****. Praise and thank* ***You*** *for always being with us to help us to be bold in witnessing for* ***You****.* ***You*** *are wonderful! In your holy* ***Son's*** *name and power of* ***His*** *resurrection. Amen*

That is, with Jews, what I did was put myself in the position of a non-Messianic **Jew (9:20a).** No matter to whom **Paul** was speaking, **He** never compromised **his** message. **He** presented **the Good News** truthfully and forcefully. But by the same token, **he** never unnecessarily offended those to whom **he** spoke by behaving in an insensitive manner **(10:32)**. Unfortunately, today, this phrase suggests being a deceiver or a chameleon who changes his behavior to suit his audience. We know that **Paul** rebuked **Peter** for behaving in this way (see the commentary on **Galatians Bb – The Antioch Incident: How Can You Force Jews to Live Like Gentiles**). **Paul** would later write: **We refuse to make use of shameful underhanded methods, employing deception or distorting God's message (Second Corinthians 4:2a),** and then used three chapters of that letter to defend **himself** against such charges **(Second Corinthians Chapters 10-12)**. **He** could hardly expect them to believe **him** there if in the present passage they were to understand **him** as teaching that the end justifies the means.

Nevertheless, modern critics of this passage continue to claim that **Paul** was **Torah** observant when **he** was with **Jews**, but ignored it when **he** was with **Gentiles**. But their misunderstanding of these verses forces them into a cul-de-sac from which their only escape is to view **Paul** as putting on an act for the sake of the Kingdom. For they give **his** circumcising **Timothy (Acts 16:1-3)** as an example of "becoming as a **Jew** to **the Jews**" and "as under the law to those under the law" and they cite his eating with **Gentiles**, whose food, presumably, was non-kosher **(Galatians 2:11-14)**, to illustrate his "becoming as apart from law to those apart from the law." By doing so, they reveal three misinterpretations. First, they think that

"becoming as" means "behaving like;" secondly, they think that "under the law" means "expected to obey the **Torah**" and as a consequence equate "**the Jews**" with "those under the law;" and thirdly, they seem unaware of the fact that being **Jewish** is not something one can turn-on or turn-off at will like a water faucet.

With regard to this third point, **Paul** never considered **himself** an ex-**Jew**. Since **he** remained **a Jew** all **his** life, we can eliminate another misinterpretation of "becoming as" or "becoming something that one formerly was not." **Paul** did not become a chameleon, "becoming as" **the people** around **him**. **What he did was empathize with them. He put himself in their position. He** entered into **their** needs and aspirations, **their** strengths and weaknesses, **their** opportunities and constraints, **their** ideas, feelings and values – in short, using the current way of saying it, **he** tried to understand "where **they** were coming from."

Having established common ground with those **he** was trying to reach, **Paul** could then communicate **the Good News** in ways familiar to them, using rabbinical teaching methods with **Jews**, and philosophical reasoning with **Greeks**. With **the weak, he** would bear with **them** because **he** understood the origin of **their weakness (8:7-12)**. **He** did everything possible to overcome all barriers to **the gospel** – psychological, social, and especially cultural; for **he** knew the task of communicating **the gospel** had been entrusted to **him (9:15-18** and **23)**. **He** knew **he** could not expect others to meet **him** half-way. But **he** was never a hypocrite.

In order to win Jews (9:20b). Earlier, **Paul** announced that **his** goal was **to win as many people as possible** to trust **in Messiah**, that is, **as many** of **all kinds of people** as **he** could. By **"winning" them**, of course, **he** means getting **them** to realize that **they** are sinners who need **ADONAI's** forgiveness, and can obtain it only by accepting **Yeshua's** atoning death on **their** behalf. It is critical to understand that **Jews** are not excluded from needing **God's** forgiveness through **Yeshua**; if **they** were, **Paul** would not be making efforts **to win Jews.** Those who ignore this mandate, or purposely ignore it because of replacement theology (see the commentary on **Romans Ai – The Righteous Shall Live by Faith**), violate this teaching.

Paul just mentioned the Jews, no need to repeat that. Now he talks about three groups of Gentiles. The first have been Judaized and subjected themselves to a legalistic perversion of the Torah; the second, pagans with no involvement with Torah at all; and the third, are the "weak" who

subject themselves to their own overly strict conscience as if it were Torah.

First, with [Judaized Gentiles] in subjection to a legalistic perversion of the Torah (Greek: *upo nomon*, meaning *under something that is not the Torah but a perversion of it, specifically, a perversion that tries to turn Torah into a set of rules that one can supposedly go through the motions, with neither faith nor love for either **God**, yet earn a right standing with **God***). That is why David Stern in his translation of the Complete Jewish Bible translates this verse: **With** those **people** (Greek: *ho*) **in subjection to a legalistic perversion of the Torah (9:20c).** Furthermore, **people** are not "under the law" in the sense of "having to obey" it, but "under" it in an oppressive sense, **in subjection to** it as to **a slavemaster**, a metaphor that **Paul** uses whenever the Greek phrase *upo nomon* appears in both **Galatians** (see the commentary on **Galatians Bm – The Torah Became our Guardian to Lead Us to Messiah**), and **Romans** (see the commentary on **Romans Bv – The New Master in Messiah**).[241]

With [Judaized Gentiles] in subjection to a legalistic perversion of the Torah (see the commentary on **Galatians Ag – Who were the Judaizers**), **I put myself in the position to empathize with someone under such legalism, in order to win those [Gentiles] under this legalism (9:20d). The legalistic perversion of the Torah** that **[Judaized Gentiles]** became enslaved to was not always non-Messianic **Judaism**. In fact, more often than not it was a watered-down form of it, perhaps binding them to observe certain **Jewish** holidays **(Colossians 2:16-17; Galatians 4:10)**, or binding the men to get **circumcised** by not obeying the rest of the **Jewish** mitzvot **(Galatians 5:3** and **6:13).** Unsaved **Gentiles** who subjected themselves to some, but not all, of the **Jewish** practice were called **God-fearers** (see the commentary on **Acts Bb – An Ethiopian Asks about Isaiah 53**), but not all **God-fearers** became legalistic about their observance of **Jewish** customs, **Paul** applied the principles of the Jerusalem Council (see the commentary on **Acts Bt – The Council's Letter to the Gentile Believers**).

Even though I myself am not in subjection to a legalistic perversion of the Torah (9:20e). If the Greek phrase *upo nomon* meant "required to obey **the Torah**," **Paul** could not have written this. **Paul** was a **Jew (Acts 13:9)**, and **Jews** are *required* to obey **the Torah** . . . **the** true **Torah. The psalmist** said it this way: **How blessed are those who reject the advice of the wicked, don't stand in the way of sinners or sit where scoffers sit! Their delight is in ADONAI's**

Torah; in His Torah they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams – they bear their fruit in season, their leaves never wither, everything they do succeeds (Psalm 1:1-3). The next verse reveals what **Paul** understood about **himself** in relation to **the** one and only **Torah . . . the Torah** of Moshe; this present verse only talks about **his** relationship to the **legalistic perversion** of **it**.[242]

Second, when I am with [pagan Gentiles] who live outside the framework of Torah (9:21a). Those who live outside (The Greek: *tois anomois* can mean *to the lawless, in the sense of "wicked," or, as here, those who do not relate to the Torah at all)**.** In **Romans 2:12-16** this would be synonymous with **the Gentiles**; but here, as indicated in **9:20c**, it means a particular group of **Gentiles** – **those** who have neither subjected themselves to a legalistic perversion of **the Torah**, nor "weak" who have made **their** overly strict consciences into a **Torah** of their own. This **pagan Gentile** tends toward lawlessness and lack of **discipline** (see the commentary on **Romans An – The Depraved Mind of the Gentile Pagan**). Some of **the people** to whom **Paul** was writing were once in this category **(6:9-11)**. Indeed, the whole tone of **8:1** to **11:1**, and indeed the whole letter, suggests that this was the mindset **Paul** was dealing with among many of the leaders of the **Corinthian** church.

I put myself in the position to empathize with **[the pagan Gentile] in order to win him to the Lord – although I myself am not a pagan, but** live **within the framework of the Torah of Moshe, as upheld and** modified in accordance with what **Messiah** has said and done to establish the B'rit Chadashah **(9:21b). The Torah of Messiah** is not something that does away with or replaces **the Torah of Moshe**; rather, as **Yeshua** said: **Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete (Matthew 5:17).** As a result, even though the Pharisees and the **Torah**-teachers, and the rabbis after them, teach many things about **the Torah** that are true, they miss the mark to the extent that non-Messianic **Judaism** makes **the Torah** a legalistic system that perverts its true intention, which is to receive the grace of **ADONAI** through **faith** (see the commentary on **Romans Ct – Praying for the Jewish Community**).

Paul does not say that **he** is **in subjection to** (Greek: *upo,* meaning *under*) a perverted **Torah of Moshe** which leads to legalism, because there is no oppressiveness, no subjection, in being within the framework of **the Torah of Messiah. Yeshua Himself** said: **My yoke is easy, My burden is light**

(Matthew 11:28-30; Acts 15:10). When **Paul** wants to emphasize oppressiveness or compulsion in relation to something abstract, such as **the Torah**, **he** uses *upo*, meaning under; if that is not **his** intention, **he** uses *en*, meaning **in**, *within*, or *in the framework of*. Thus, for example, **Romans 3:19** reads: **We know that whatever the Torah says, it says to those living within the framework of the Torah.** The last seven words translate the Greek *en to nomo*, or *in the law.* A number of English translations fail to bring out this important distinction.[243]



Third, when I am with the "weak" [Gentiles], I put myself in the position to empathize with the "weak," in order to win the "weak" (9:22a). In relation to its context (see **Bj – Concerning Our Freedom in Messiah**), this is the main point of **9:20-22**. **Paul** had voluntarily **made himself a slave to all (9:19).** Examples of this included non-Messianic **Jews (9:20a-b)** and **Judaized Gentiles (9:20c-d-e)**. But now **he** speaks of a group the others above were willing to ignore and ride roughshod over – **the weak**, those with misguided **consciences** (see **Bm – The Weaker Brother or Sister**). **Their** scruples were not to be despised, but understood, so that **they** may be **won to faith** (in the immediate context), or **their** life in **the Lord** strengthened (in the larger context). A deeper understanding of **God's** truth will free **the weak** from bondage: **You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:32).**[244]

With all kinds of people, both Jews and Gentiles, I have become all kinds of things, so that in all kinds of circumstances I might save at least some of them (9:22b). He did not compromise the gospel. **He** would not change anything to satisfy anyone. But **he** would condescend in any way for anyone if that would, in any way, help bring them to **Messiah**. **He** would never set the truth of the gospel, but **he** would gladly restrict **his** liberty in the gospel. **He** would not offend a **Jew**, **Gentile**, or those who were **weak** in understanding.

If a person is offended by **God's Word**, that's their problem. It they are offended by biblical doctrine, standards, or church discipline that's their problem. That person is offended by **God**. But if someone is offended by our unnecessary behavior or practices – no matter how good and acceptable those may be in themselves – their problem becomes our problem. It is not a problem of **Torah** but a problem of love **(Matthew 5:39-41)**. **Paul's** life centered in living out the gospel and in preaching and teaching the gospel. Nothing else was of any concern for **him**. **But I do it all for the sake of the Good News, so that I may be a joint sharer in it (9:23).**[245] This continues to elaborate the earlier principle: **Paul made himself a slave to all in order to win as many people as possible** to trust **in Messiah (9:19).**

Paul's example (9:24-27): The Greeks had two great athletic festivals, the Olympic games and the Isthmian games. The latter was held in **Corinth**, and therefore intimately familiar to those to whom **Paul** was writing. Contestants in the games had to prove rigorous training for ten months. The last month was spent in **Corinth**, with supervised daily workouts in the gymnasium and athletic fields. **The race** was always a major attraction at the games, and this is the figure **Paul** uses to illustrate the **faithful** life of a believer. **Don't you know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one wins the prize?** No one would train so hard for so long without intending to **win**. Yet, out of such a large number of **runners**, only one would **win**.

So then, Paul concludes: **run to win (9:24)!**

A great difference between the Isthmian **races**, and **the race** that believers **run** is that every believer who is willing to pay the price of careful training can **win**. We do not compete against each other, but against obstacles – practical, physical, and spiritual – that would hinder us. In a sense, every believer **runs** his or her own **race**, enabling each one of us to be a **winner** in **winning** souls for **Messiah**. **Paul**, therefore, advises us to **run to win**, by setting aside anything that might hinder **the Good News** (see **Bo – Laying Aside Rights**).

Holding tightly to your freedom in Messiah to do anything you want is a sure way to lose the race of soul-winning. Many of the Corinthian believers seriously limited their testimony because they refused to give up their rights, and in doing so won few and offended many.

Now every athlete in training submits himself to strict discipline, and he

does it just to win a laurel wreath that will soon wither away. But we do it to win a crown that will last forever (see the commentary on **Revelation Cc – For We Must All Appear Before the Bema Seat of Christ**). But for that to happen, **discipline** and self-control are needed **(9:25).** No believer will be successful in witnessing, or anything else worthwhile, without **discipline**. Every good thing that we accomplish – whether in learning, business, artistic skill, marriage, witnessing, or whatever – is accomplished through **discipline** and self-control.

If an athlete expects to excel, he voluntarily restricts his **freedom**. His sleep, his diet, and his exercise, are not determined by his **freedom** to eat, sleep or exercise any time he wants, but by his training. And thus, the illustration of the athlete's **disciplined** self-control is a rebuke to the half-hearted, out-of-shape believer who does almost nothing to prepare themselves to witness to the lost – and consequently never do.

Paul had a purpose in **running**. **Accordingly, I don't run aimlessly but straight for the finish line.** Changing metaphors, **he** said: **I don't shadow-box but try to make every punch count (9:26). He** was always **fighting the** real **fight**, **the good fight (First Timothy 1:18). I treat my body hard** (Greek: *hupopiazo*, literally *to give his body a black eye*) **and make it my slave so that, after proclaiming the Good News to others, I myself will not be disqualified** from rewards due to faithful workers **(9:27).** Here is another metaphor from the Isthmian games. A contestant who failed to meet the training requirements was **disqualified**. He could not even **run**, much less win. **Paul** didn't want to spend **his** life preaching the requirements to others, and then be **disqualified** for not meeting the requirements **himself**.

Many believers start their walk with **the Lord** with enthusiasm and devotion. They train carefully for a while but soon tire of the effort and begin to "break training." They begin to exercise their freedom in **Messiah** to do other things. Not necessarily bad things, but other things nonetheless. Before long they are **disqualified** from being effective witnesses. They do not have what it takes, because they are unwilling to pay the price. The flesh, the world, everyday life, personal interests, and often simple laziness hinder their spiritual growth and preparation for service. Even good things can interfere with the best. Indulging our freedoms can interfere with fulfillment of love. Following our own ways can keep others from knowing **the Way**. Souls are won by those who are prepared to be used when **the Spirit** chooses to use them.[246]