

*16If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! 17For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. 18What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.*

*19For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. 20To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. 21To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. 22To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. 23I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.*

I think it was on Tuesday this week when Sue gave me the first report: The teacher's lounge at school was a mess – all year the secretary has been taking care of it. She is out sick this week. I cleaned it up.

Wednesday the report went like this: Somebody left a note on the table in the teacher's lounge: Teachers this is your Lounge – clean up your mess! Sue said to me, “I wonder who left the note – I would have understood it yesterday but things looked good in there after I cleaned it up. I am really confused.”

Thursday: Sue reported: “Mystery solved. I learned it was the secretary who left the note. She must be fed up with cleaning up after us.”

How did it happen? I imagine it started something like this with the secretary thinking: The teacher's lounge is a mess. I'll clean it up. It is not my job but I can help in this way.

That day she walked out of the school feeling great.

The next day the lounge is a mess once more. She turned off the coffee pot – cleaned out the grounds – cleared the trash – wiped off the tables. “It is good to be helping others,” she thought.

At first when others saw her picking up they said, “It is really great of you to clean things up. Thanks.”

But as the weeks passed everyone started acting as if the lounge was her responsibility - more trash left on the tables, more spills not wiped up.

And each day when she went home she felt more used.

Then she got sick. “Surely someone will pick up the slack,” she thought. She heard what a mess things were on Tuesday morning since no one had picked up on Monday.

She wrote the note.

If you have ever been her you know exactly what was in her heart. The more you do for others the more they expect. At home, at work, at the church, in the community – the more freely you give, the more quietly you just take care of things, the more faithfully you do what others should be doing – the less regard they will have for you.

That was Paul’s experience at Corinth. Paul had first proclaimed Christ to those who became Christians there. He had served them – asking nothing in return. But over time they started to think of him as a second class leader. This whole ninth chapter of 1 Corinthians is Paul arguing that he has all the rights of the other apostles but that he has not made use of his rights so that he could make the gospel free of charge. Just as Jesus has made the love and forgiveness and salvation of God free of charge to Paul so Paul makes the proclamation of the gospel free to the Corinthians.

And they kicked him in the shins for it.

What should Paul do?

Get angry?

Quit?

Stop talking to them?

Go find someone else to love?

Paul does not do any of those. He communicates with them instead.

Maybe that is the first thing you and I should learn when we are feeling abused. Instead of crawling off in a corner and licking our wounds or posting an anonymous note maybe we could simply state: “I have been cleaning up the kitchen each week – could someone else help me?”

Now Paul does not ask for help from the Corinthians but he does want them to know that he has been giving them a gift.

When someone criticizes your work it is all right to say, “I have been giving myself freely in this way in thanks to Christ for what he has given me. I do not owe you this service but I have given it to you freely.”

If the words are spoken gently and in love you have made the situation clearer.

Often when a situation is clearer hostility increases. I do not want to know that someone else has been doing something for me and I have not been appreciative. But often that is true. Maybe I will come to my senses after a bit.

But it is also true that sometimes when people give gifts they think they are creating an obligation. Maybe Paul was guilty of that – thinking that his sacrifices for the Corinthians should have gained him respect and gratitude rather than criticism. What goes on in our hearts is very complicated.

But I do know this: God is on the side of truth, and kindness, openness and understanding. But God is not delighted when you or I play the martyr. And relationships are broken.

God’s love for you in Jesus Christ is always a gift. If you offer yourself in this Christian community or at school or at work or at home as an expression of your gratitude to Jesus, remember that it is out of gratitude to Jesus that you do these things and not to win other’s love and approval. Jesus knows what you do. He promises that those who sacrifice for him will surely not lose their reward.

But if what you do with your hands or feel in your heart begins to make you feel superior or bitter or used, beware.

Communicate.

Ask for help.

Share the burden.

Let others be responsible also.

Finally after many letters – it looks like Paul actually wrote three or more to the Corinthians – things were worked out. Paul did not give up.

So in Christ you will be given grace to work out your differences also.