

### 8-3-14 Sermon 1 Corinthians 9: 19-23

By the time we get to our passage in 1 Corinthians 9, Paul has already addressed several problems in the church including strong divisions and factions within the body, lawsuits between believers, sexual immorality, quarrels over food offered to idols, - and then later-in the book – he even needs to defend the truth of the doctrine of the resurrection against some who oppose it.

So - In Corinth, we find a very imperfect church.

Now let's read the passage one more time and ask for God's help in conforming our lives to His word....

#### [READ 1 Cor.9:19-23 & PRAY]

I'd like to highlight three points that stand out to me....the second one is a little longer than the other two....and as we go I will suggest how the scripture may apply to us.... So, the first point has to do with the MEANS Paul uses to present the gospel, the second longer point concerns the CENTRALITY of the gospel in Paul's life, and the third point focuses on the parenthetical phrases in this passage. I'm thinking 40 minutes.... or so.

**My first observation regarding the MEANS Paul uses in presenting the gospel is obvious - Paul exercises his freedom – his liberty as a Christian - to serve others.....[Verse 19:] "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them."**

To this point Paul has affirmed that he free from financial dependence on anyone and free from the restrictions of the law....and now he affirms that he exercises that freedom to make himself a servant. It is radically unlike anything we would expect.

In Galatians Paul declares " *For freedom Christ has set us free; **stand firm** therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*" Our freedom from the requirements of law is a precious thing that Christ has accomplished for us.

We have Christian liberty in Jesus.....and we must cling tenaciously to that blood-bought internal liberty Christ has gained for us.....we are told to *stand firm* in that freedom.

BUT - the external expression of that liberty occurs before men. ....and we MUST be sensitive to the fact that there are many occasions that **DEMAND** that we restrain the expression of our liberty.

In chapter 8, Paul surrenders **his right** to eat whatever he likes for the sake of a weaker brother's conscience. Earlier in chapter 9, he affirms his & Barnabas' God-given **right** to be financially supported by those to whom they have preached....we all agree with that and we practice that.

BUT look at verse 12: " *Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.*"

So now when we come to verse 19, Paul once again affirms his freedom and his Christian liberty.... And after affirming his liberty, he immediately goes on to deny the exercising that liberty.

It is completely counter-cultural, instead of exercising his freedom for his own enjoyment or comfort; he exercises his freedom to serve others.

That's not natural. It is very unlikely that would be my first thought...

BUT - that is exactly what Jesus commanded, right? When the disciples were vying for the #1 position in the kingdom, Jesus said .....

Matt 20:25 "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. **It shall not be so among you.** But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus did not correct the disciples for their desire to be the #1 Guy in the kingdom of God, but He did show them the proper way to achieve that: Servant-hood.....self-denial.

LIKE here: Paul doesn't care about getting his own way...he isn't insisting on his own way or verbally manipulating people to get what he wants.....

What I love about the Corinthian passage— and please hear this – is that self-denial is not an end in itself. We are not commanded to deny ourselves just for asceticism. There is a goal to be achieved.....there is a purpose to it. Paul says, "....*I have made myself a servant to all **that I might win more of them.***"

It is about the gospel.

It cost Paul to be a preacher of the gospel....he preached at the expense of personal comfort...and here he lays down his own rights in serving & submitting to others.....

.....**FOR the gospel's sake.**

Ten times in the NT we told to imitate a godly example that is given.....Twice in this letter, Paul tells us to imitate him...and we do well to imitate him in his willingness to surrender his own rights in order to win others to the gospel.

...which is a good segue into my second – longer - observation: the **centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ**

It stands behind everything Paul says here. His immediate purpose is to win others.

You know.....Winning others means to win them by the gospel and to win them for Jesus.

In each of the five times the word "win" is used in this passage, it is used as part of a purpose statement:

Verse 19: "....that I might win more of them." Verse 20: "....that I might win the Jews . . . that I might win those under the law." Verse 21: "....that I might win those who are without law." Verse 22: "....that I might win the weak." He uses a different word at the end of verse 22....I'll get back to that later.

One of my favorite passages in the Bible –you have probably heard me quote it before –... is in Acts 20.

Paul is returning to Jerusalem thinking he is going there to die. .... he is saying good-bye to the Ephesians elders: Verse 24....*“But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”*

**What a great life’s mission statement! Acts 20:24!** The gospel of the grace of God is found in the person of Jesus Christ...In this life and in the next - it is all that really endures...all that really matters. ....and as long as Paul lives, it is his single goal.

This passage - 1 Corinthians 9, verses 19-23 - demonstrates one way how testifying to the gospel of the grace of God works itself out in practice: *“I have become all things to all men that I may by all means save some.”*

‘*Becoming all things to all people*’ involves 2 things. First it means not putting an unnecessary stumbling block that might keep someone from the gospel. But secondly, it also implies he is actually speaking the gospel to them.

**This is his purpose** - regardless of who he is engaged with. He gives four examples here: the first are Jews, and 2nd those under the law, (...who I take to be Jews also...under the law of Moses)...I think he says it this way to simply to highlight the difference with the 3<sup>rd</sup> example - ‘those outside the law’ – who are Gentiles, who do not live under the law of Moses.

The final example is those he calls “the weak’. Now you may think this refers to non-Christians because he repeats that he becomes like them so that he might win them....and there are plenty of folk that would agree with you.

But, in chapter 8 “*the weak*” means weak Christians...he refers to them as *brothers*....men who were not firm and decided in their views or perhaps mis-guided in their views.... and the intent of that discussion in C. 8 was to encourage the more enlightened Corinthian Christians to accommodate themselves to those weaker brethren. It seems very natural to understand it in the same way here.

I have to believe that ‘the weak’ refers to those ***brothers*** whose consciences are so easily offended. Chapter 8 warns against putting a stumbling block before them....in other words, don’t confuse them about things that don’t really matter...things that don’t have eternal significance....things indifferent.

This is a bit trickier ...and I need to watch my words here.... we don’t want to leave them as a weaker brother or sister....we want to sort of put our arm around them and guide them into a fuller understanding of the gospel.

Now to some of you that may sound very prideful.....I hope it you don’t think I’m being arrogant....I don’t mean to.... but I know in some areas, God has gifted us with a knowledge of Him that many others who live under the umbrella of ‘Christendom’ do not enjoy.....BUT - *this [too] is not of our own doing; it is the gift of God.*

So - that is exactly what Paul is telling us here. When we meet weaker brothers, let's not highlight the differences between us. Let's initiate conversations that highlight what is fundamental to our faith: a heart change, a real desire to magnify Jesus by trusting in Him and living in a way that demonstrates it.

Let's not show them a giddy or superficial happiness, but the deep-seated joy & peace that comes from being sure of what Jesus Christ has accomplished on our behalf.

Jesus died so that we would have life....abundant & eternal life. Our sins were placed on Him and when He died on that cross our sins were paid for. We turn away from our former life and we turn in faith to Jesus and we are forgiven. We are declared "not guilty"....that gives us a REAL peace with God.

But when we say that Paul '[became] all things to all people' there is a **important distinction** we need to make.

True - Paul was very accommodating to others....like in Romans 14 where he again speaks of the weak and not quarreling over "religious" external things that really don't have an eternal significance ....like what foods you eat or what holidays you observe.

**Eat certain foods.....don't eat them.....observe certain days as holy-days....don't observe them.....it doesn't matter.** *"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."*

**To be clear, I am not suggesting in making himself like others Paul included anything that would be sinful.**

He obviously means this in non-sinful ways. This is clear from what he says about being under the law of Christ....and I will get to that in a bit..... So we're talking about things indifferent; things that have no eternal consequence one way or the other.

Secondly, - and this is **CRITICAL** - I am also not suggesting that the gospel itself should be accommodated to people by changing it in any way to make it more palatable to the natural man.

**No, no, no.....**In Galatians he says, "*.... there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.*" And in chapter 2 of that letter he says, "*....Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in..... to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.*"

Paul would not change the least truth in the least way in order to satisfy anyone. YES - he would condescend in any way for anyone if that would in any way help bring him to Christ. He would never set aside a truth of the gospel, but he would gladly restrict his liberty in the gospel.

He would not offend Jew, Gentile, or those weak in understanding.

If a person is offended by God's Word, that is his problem. If he is offended by biblical doctrine, standards, or church discipline, that is his problem. That person is offended by God.

But if he is offended by our unnecessary behavior or practices or speech — no matter how good and acceptable those may be in themselves — his problem becomes our problem.

It is not a problem of law but a problem of love.

LOOK....We know the gospel can be offensive.... but I am saying that we don't have to be personally offensive. I agree that this distinction can be difficult at times....it calls for discernment.....

I know....I know: one size doesn't fit all.

In verse 22, in a sort of summary statement, Paul uses a different word to basically say the same thing....  
*"I have become all things to all people **that by all means I might save some.**"*

To win them is to save them. This is the quest that consumes Paul...Win some. Save some. Win more.

Paul's passion about the gospel consumed him.

You remember John's account of when Jesus drove those money-changers out of the temple — John writes *"His disciples remembered that it was written, **"Zeal for your house will consume me."***

It wasn't the physical temple that eventually **consumed** Jesus in death...it was the true house of God...the true temple.....the church.....it was his zeal for the church that swallowed Him up.

Well.....It consumed Paul as well. *"I do not count my life of any value, nor as precious to myself.....I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them....I do it all for the sake of the gospel"*

You and I can't muster up that kind of zeal in ourselves. We look at that passion and we admire it....I hope we do. And even though we can't work it up on our own....we can pray that God will increase our passion for the gospel. We can pray that each one of us seeks first His kingdom. ...and His righteousness.

Immersing ourselves in His Word....fellowship with one another....prayer — asking God to work His saving power in me and in all of us.....these are the spiritual weapons God has provided for our journey.

In chapter 15 Paul writes: *"For I **delivered** to you **as of first importance what I also received**: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...."*

Receiving and then delivering the gospel is all ONE package ....they cannot be separated. Paul put them both under the heading of FIRST IMPORTANCE.

By now you are likely thinking that I want every one of us to go out and start finding opportunities to present the gospel to our friends & acquaintances....our co-workers & neighbors....and to our relatives....or to people we pass on the street.

Well – YES – that would be great. I certainly would like more of us to proclaim the good news to those who we have some contact with. ...myself included.

I'm sure we won't do it as flawlessly as Paul would have, but I am guessing that if Paul were in our shoes, those folks we're thinking about who haven't heard the gospel – would have by now.

I know that presenting the gospel to others can often be a little scary, especially if you seldom do it or are unsure of yourself. ...so...let me step that down a notch.

Remember the story of Phillip and Nathanael at the end of John chapter 1?

Phillip calls Nathanael and gives him his testimony: *'We have found the one of whom Moses spoke, Jesus of Nazareth.'* Now – for sure - we wouldn't put it that way...we might say something like "I have found a real peace ....I know that Jesus is alive in Heaven and the gospel is true." .....or something like that.

You remember what Nathanael said in response: *"Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"* And very likely the people we speak with will raise some objection like "Oh I don't believe in God, but I am happy for you." ...or maybe "I'm a Catholic – I already know all that."

In one sense, it doesn't really matter what they say. Let's have the courage to be like Philip ..... respond to them the way Philip responded to Nathanael: **"come and see"** ...."Why don't you come to church this week and you can see for yourself..." Or maybe just invite them to your small group....."no commitment...just come this week."

If we can't be like Paul in presenting the gospel to someone this week, then let's be like Philip and invite someone to church or small group this week. The gospel of Jesus is proclaimed both in this building and in our groups.

Okay.....Verse 23 *"I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that [here comes the purpose statement].....that I may share with them in its blessings."*

Did you hear that?

Do you see a difference?

We might have expected him to say *"I do it all for the sake of the gospel that **THEY** may share with us in the gospel's blessings."* .....but he doesn't.....he says *"...that I may share with them in its blessings."*

Verse 23 does look "backward" to the things Paul does for the sake of the gospel, but it also looks forward to verses 24-27: **[READ VS 24 – 27]**

Listen to what Calvin says about verse 23: "As the Corinthians might think [to] themselves, that this was a peculiarity in Paul's case on the ground of his [apostolic] office, [but Paul] argues, from the very design of it, that this is common to all Christians. For when he declares, that his aim had been, that he might become a partaker of the gospel, he indirectly intimates that all who do not act the same part with him are unworthy of the fellowship of the gospel."

Very strong words, but I confess that I sometimes think like that too.... don't you? We think that Jesus was God....Paul was an apostle...but these things can't be expected of us. Calvin disagrees with that....and I trust we agree with Calvin....and with Paul.

Paul sees becoming a servant as a necessary component of the gospel's blessings..... *"I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings."*

It's another way of saying what Jesus said: *"For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."*

We too often think that this type of servant-hood is for others. We ask if I am being called upon to follow Paul's lead in this....do I really have to change my life?

The answer comes in the next chapter: *"Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; [in other words, adapt as much as you can in non-sinful ways] just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved. "*

Then in very next verse comes the answer to our question comes in the form of a command:

*"Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ."*

May God help us do that.

Okay....**My final – and very short – observation focuses on those two parenthetical – but important – points that Paul makes: "I am not under the law, but I am not outside the law of God but under the law of Christ."**

I know at first glance these may sound self-contradictory and leave us scratching our heads, but give it a few minutes of serious thought and it becomes pretty clear.

When Paul declares that he is not under the law, it is said in reference to Jews and those under the Jewish law – the Mosaic law....but in reference to Gentiles – those who do not have the Mosaic law – though he becomes like them, Paul affirms that he himself is not outside the law of God but under the law of Christ.

Paul tells us **several** times that believers are not under the law of Moses ...in Rom 6:14 for ONE example, he said, *"For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace."*

I don't know how much clearer he could be.

However, Paul only uses that phrase – "law of Christ" – one other time.... In Galatians 6:2, as he is giving that church practical advice, he writes, *"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."*

I'm painting with a very broad brush here, but 'bearing one another's burdens' sounds to me very much like making ourselves a servant to all....they are both motivated by a "law" of love....the law of Christ.

Please do not think we are just exchanging the “law of Moses” for the “law of Christ”..... or that we are obsoleting one set of rules in order to establish another.

The goal of all Christian instruction is love. Love is the fulfillment of the whole law. We tend to look at more external things, like charisma or personality, status, or even how a person is gifted...or knowledge of the Bible...things like that.

**Love of God & love of our neighbor is the one great umbrella “law” that is the fulfillment of all the Mosaic law & all the prophets because it is foundational to the law.**

I am sure these words of Paul are very familiar to you: **[READ 1 COR 13: 1 -3]**

This morning I have advocated that we imitate Jesus and imitate Paul in becoming a servant to others....yet no amount of self-denial, self-sacrifice, knowledge, or even faith means anything apart from love.

Jesus said, “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*”

“....***just as I have loved you***, you also are to love one another.”

The particulars of that demand many more sermons, but suffice it for now to say that this *new commandment*....this “law” of love...IS the law of Christ.

The real goal of this sermon was to point us to Jesus..... our perfect Savior ...our Lord & our God .

He alone can create in us **some** measure of ability to love one another as He loved us.