

# 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

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[ 0 : 00 ] For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To 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 not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law.

To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.

They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air.

[ 1 : 07 ] But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest, after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

If you want to keep your Bibles open to 1 Corinthians 9, that's the passage we'll be looking at. And if you wouldn't mind, let's pray real quick.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your word. We ask that you would teach us through it now.

Lord, conform my voice to yours. In your son's name we pray. Amen. Amen. Last week we saw Paul's argument for why he has and has given up his right to wages for ministry work.

The reason and the key to this whole section, chapters 8 to 10, is that he could not let, he could not tolerate letting wages stand in the way of his commitment to, his compulsion for the gospel.

[ 2 : 24 ] He would not let it be a stumbling block for others who would see his wages as his goal. Rather than his compulsion, the reason that he has given himself to the gospel work.

If for the sake of the gospel answers why, then I would suggest our passage today looks at how. To get there though, I think we need to look at and understand the what.

So what? Christian mission. In chapter 8, the question was very much of causing one's brother to stumble. It was about life as relatively new Christians.

And the implications for everyday decisions about buying meat at the market and participating in feasts where the food had been sacrificed to idols. Christians ought to practice restraint rather than appeal to their rights if it's going to cause others to sin.

It's a defensive position. And so Paul urged the Corinthians to play that defensive game. But through his personal example in 8.13 and in the passage we saw last week, Paul began to exhort the Corinthians not just on the defensive game, but on the offensive game as well.

[ 3 : 54 ] It was no longer just about preventing and stumbling, but it had become about, in our passage makes it clear, it had become about gaining.

Listen to the repetitions in verses 19 to 22 of chapter 9. For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.

To the Jews I became a Jew in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law.

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.

I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. Do you notice the repetition of win? That's his intention. It's not win necessarily in the athletic sense, it's actually win in a gaining sense.

[ 5 : 01 ] More people come to the cause of the gospel through the gaining. It's an important word. It actually comes up in financial contexts. So it's the profit, it's the result of investment.

His goal was simply to win more of them. That's what he says in verse 19. Win more for the gospel. Now, we might be wondering, what does it mean to win people for the gospel?

Paul, brilliant rhetorician, ends his litany by making two small changes. Did you see them there in the climax in 22? I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

Not win some, but save some. The goal is nothing less than salvation. That's it.

That's what he means to win. Salvation. But did you see the other change? Instead of all, which is what you expect after the repetition of all so many times, it's some.

[ 6 : 09 ] Paul has no romantic, universalistic view that we will all eventually be saved. He's a hard realist playing a numbers game.

It always has been about winning more, verse 19, but it was never assumed that all should be gained. Christian mission.

Seeing Paul's focus on Christian mission is instructive for us. While Paul is certainly arguing about his own role in Christian mission here, he assumes it for us as well.

I mean, we could go to several places in the Bible to talk about the Christian's responsibility to evangelize, compulsion to share in that evangelistic mission, but we don't need to.

Look at verse 24 for a moment. So run that you may obtain it. It's an imperative. Run. Run in this way that you may win the prize.

[ 7 : 10 ] How you run matters, of course, but run knowing that you run not, but run knowing that how you run not only makes the difference for your brother or sister stumbling, but it makes a difference for winning people to the gospel.

How you live your life, Corinthians. How you live your life, Chicagoans. Doesn't just potentially cause other Christians to sin. It demonstrates your commitment to evangelism.

And for Paul, the commitment is clear. Verse 23, I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. So what?

Christian life for evangelistic mission. Having seen the what of Christian mission, we need to focus now on the focus of this passage. How?

I want to make two observations concerning how Paul engages in Christian mission. First, look at the part of the passage we've already read, verses 19 to 23. Paul gives the breadth of his approach in the first verse and the summary at the end.

[ 8 : 18 ] 19, Look at the summary.

I've become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. Privileged, educated, and apparently self-funded, Paul's strategy was about becoming a slave.

This, of course, echoes the arguments of chapters, of chapter 1, 21, and 26. If you want to turn back there. For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

And this is because, verse 26, God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. Paul points back to Christ, the consummate example of becoming weak to save people.

This act actually being the very gospel itself. And Paul's overall point remains. All things to all people.

[ 9 : 36 ] Look at the specifics. Paul would become as one under the law or one free from the law. He would become weak. He would put on the uniform of Jew. All types of religious obligations were dispensable if it meant the gospel was going forward.

Paul's strategy was one of becoming all things to all people that some might be saved. What does this mean for us? I mean, I think we can think about this both corporately and individually.

As a church, it means a lot. Where we meet, when we meet, what style of music are we having when we meet? These are all things that should not be preventing our evangelistic efforts.

Of course, we can't do everything in as pluralistic and as entitled a society as we live in. But if we can do something different that will increase the reach of the gospel in our neighborhood, the gospel rightly understood, let's get to it.

Individually, this should mean something too. We make a thousand little decisions every day about how we are going to relate to people, how we're going to fit in socially or not. Are we thinking about those decisions and how they affect our witness?

[ 11 : 01 ] Are we aware that how we make those decisions reflects our commitment to Christian mission, to evangelism? Do our work colleagues or our fellow students or our neighbors even know that we're Christians?

What's their response? Are they intrigued? Are they annoyed? Think about your neighbors for a moment. Are they annoyed that we have community group in our home until 11 p.m.

once a week? Do they see our reactions to their openly sinful lifestyles as fundamentalist judgmentalism?

Are they frustrated because we adhere to a law that never gives light to the gospel? But of course, this passage and most of us usually go the other way.

Frequently, this passage is used to justify licentiousness, to institutionalize sin, to conceal the offense of the gospel. So this brings me to the other observation.

[ 12 : 09 ] Paul gives no room, I mean, absolutely no room to licentiousness. Look at the metaphors Paul uses in 24 to 27. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but the one receives the prize?

So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

So I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified.

Running and boxing were two of the featured games in both the Olympics, remember Athens is 50 miles away from Corinth, and the Isthmian Games, which were held in Corinth, and they're one of four of the Panhellenic Games systems that happen every four years.

So the Corinthians would have been familiar with athletic competition. And so this metaphor for physical training, it's actually quite intense. Listen to Epictetus, the first century philosopher on physical training.

[ 13 : 24 ] He says, you say, I want to win at Olympia. If you do, you will have to obey instructions, eat according to regulations, keep away from desserts, exercise on a fixed schedule at definite hours, in both heat and cold.

You must not drink cold water, nor can you have a drink of wine whenever you want. You must hand yourself over to your coach exactly as you would to a doctor. Then in the contest itself, you must gouge and be gouged.

There will be times when you will sprain a wrist, turn your ankle, swallow mouthfuls of sand, and be flogged. And after all that, there are times when you lose.

Epictetus. See, Paul uses metaphors here to demonstrate the importance and restraint of how one lives Christian life for Christian mission. We are to train as one training to win an imperishable prize.

We are to exercise self-control. We are to be disciplined in how we live our lives, keeping ourselves in control, not running aimlessly or boxing shadows.

[ 14 : 30 ] It shouldn't surprise us that there are limits to being all things to all people. people. Paul began the section with an exhortation on restraint when it comes to eating food sacrificed to idols.

He turned to his personal example of restraint when it comes to taking wages for Christian ministry. He's going to return to this notion of restraint in the next chapter. So, it shouldn't surprise us that all things to all people doesn't mean anything to any people.

There are limits. And so, he gives us an approach on restraint. Being all things to all people does not include throwing out the implications of the gospel for the sake of the gospel.

Or to put it differently, the gospel has been given to Paul. It's been given to him. It's been entrusted to him. But it's not been put under his control. And it's not under our control.

It is naive. It is downright foolish to think otherwise. Missionary dating, dating somebody with the hope of winning them, is incredibly dangerous.

[ 15 : 44 ] Giving into sin, even for the sake of the gospel, is incredibly dangerous. Ironically, it destroys our witness.

See, in the last verse, Paul himself is sincerely concerned with being disqualified, being found lacking when it comes to being tested.

You remember back in chapter 3, he has built something and it will be tested by fire. See, if Paul is concerned, so should we be.

Whether it is our salvation that is being tested, and I think returning to slavery under sin is a pretty good question about salvation, or simply our witness, how we engage in Christian mission matters.

Paul is urging us toward a studied, rigorous, self-disciplined approach to being all things to all people, that some might be saved.

[ 16 : 50 ] So with that, I want to conclude. Are you a Christian? Have you trusted in the sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of your sins by faith alone?

If so, then keeping it to yourself is not really an option. And so if Christ was willing to give up everything, including his very life, to win people, then what are we willing to give up in order to simply show that truth to people?

are we ready to be all things to all people? Are we ready to make that a studied discipline in our lives? Not for our salvation, but for nothing less than the sake of the gospel.

Let me pray. Our Father in heaven, thank you for the example of your Son, who gave everything for the sake of his people, and yet did so without sin. Give us this freedom, O Lord, remove every obstacle in our lives to gospel witness.

Help us to do so with a discipline that is worthy of that gospel and your Son, who won our salvation. I pray this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

[18:09] Amen.