

Forgoing Freedom to Save Others

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[0 : 00] Well friends, let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that you speak to us through it about yourself and about your son.

We pray today that as we read your word you might challenge us to live godly lives, to be strengthened in our faith in Christ and to hold fast firm to him to the end.

And Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, it was 1982. And this band had been formed in the early 1980s and it had produced several hit singles and albums.

But it then hit the jackpot. Its hit single remained at number one for two months. The band went to the United States where the song also became a hit.

And the song was a hit, I think, because it captured an age. It tapped into something that characterised that age. And now some of you, the older ones, are going to begin to recognise things at this point.

[1 : 03] The band's name was Moving Pictures. The hit single was What About Me. Quite right. And the lyrics are straightforward. The first verse, chorus and last verse go like this.

Well, there's a little boy waiting at the counter of a corner store. He's been waiting down there, waiting half the day. They never see him from the top.

He gets pushed around, knocked to the ground. He gets to his feet and he says, What about me? It isn't fair. I've had enough. Now I want my share. Can't you see?

I want to live. You've just got to take more than you give. And now I'm standing at the corner. All the world's gone home. Nothing's changed. Nobody's been saved. And I'm feeling cold and alone.

I guess I'm lucky. I smile a lot. But sometimes I wish for more than I've got. Now, friends, I think that song captured a generation because it tapped into that generation's focus and its interests.

[2 : 00] And that generation was somewhat obsessed with itself. It was a generation that advertisers called the me generation. It was a generation, I think, not that different to most generations.

It's just they got the label that goes with it. After all, you see, I think every generation is concerned with rights. Every generation thinks, I am important.

I have rights. And those rights, doesn't matter whether it's those of a man or a woman or a child or a homosexual or a heterosexual or a non-smoker or a smoker or an Aboriginal person or someone from a particular ethnic minority or a host of other interest groups.

No matter who we are, we are concerned, aren't we, with our rights. Now, well, as we've worked through 1 Corinthians and we've seen a number of things, haven't we?

But we have seen that this generation of Christians at Corinth were exactly the same. In fact, you might as well have heard them singing the song. They knew they had certain truths about God and they knew that those truths gave them, conveyed to them rights.

[3 : 14] They had been made free in Christ. And they had the right to express their freedom in Christ. They had rights. They maintained the right to exercise those rights.

They had these things. They had every right to practice them. But, of course, that wasn't the only problem in Corinth. The Corinthians also had some problems, not only with their rights, but with their apostle.

They had doubts about Paul. They were not sure that Paul really was the apostle that either they wanted or that he thought he was.

And in 1 Corinthians 9, Paul's answer comes to both of those questions, the question of rights and the question of his apostleship. And the way he answers both questions lets us into his mind and his answers show us what it is that makes a gospel person tick.

And it also gives us a unique insight into how Christians should differ from the world around them. You see, we are different. And we ought to behave differently.

[4 : 24] So let's turn to 1 Corinthians 9. Let's have a look. Let's see Paul. Let's analyse his brain, as it were. Let's check out what God has to teach us from his word in this passage. So, open it up with me and your Bibles there.

Paul starts out the chapter boldly. And he forcefully puts four questions. Now, each of them is what we call a rhetorical question. That is, the answer is sort of, you expect an affirmative answer, a yes to everything.

And look at the questions. Verse 1. Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?

Now, let's turn to the second question first. Am I not an apostle? Questions 3 and 4 amount to his answer to question 2. Can you see that? Questions 3 and 4 amount to an answer to question 2. Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Yes, tick. Are you not my work in the Lord? Yes, tick. Therefore, I am an apostle. Tick. Okay? In other words, their very existence as a Christian congregation is a seal of his apostleship.

[5 : 34] If they exist as a congregation, then he is an apostle. He was their church planter. He had been sent by Christ. He, they are the evidence of his apostleship.

That, I think, is what verses 1 and 2 are about. And in verse 3, he turns to the issue of freedom and rights. Now, let's see if I can summarize his argument.

I'm going to try and paraphrase it, but I want you to keep your eye on the Bible as we do so. So, you're going to get my paraphrase of what's going on, and I'm going to refer to verses as we go. Okay?

Paul argues something like this. You, Corinthians, this is my defense to you. You and I know that I am your apostle.

Now, if I am your apostle, then I have a right for a wife to accompany me. I have a right for her accommodation to be paid for. If every other apostle has these sort of rights, so do I.

[6 : 35] If you want me to prove that I have these rights, then listen to these things. In the first place, being fed and watered is a natural right. It is the way God set up the world.

After all, even soldiers get paid, verse 7. Okay? Even soldiers get paid, verse 7. And vineyard keepers get their share of the grapes, verse 7.

And shepherds get their share of the milk that comes from their flocks, verse 7. So there's a natural right, and that gives me rights.

I have rights. And if you are giving away this right of support to others, then why shouldn't I be the first to get that right? After all, I am your apostle.

However, I want to tell you, this is not only my natural right. It is my scriptural right as well. After all, the scriptures say that oxen should be free to feed on the corn if they're trampling it so that it shakes loose from the husk.

[7 : 43] Now, you get the picture, don't you? There are these oxen. They're trampling around and around. And as they're trampling around, they can put their head down and start to eat from it.

There's a right that they have. Verse 9. The scriptural principle is plain. The worker shares in the fruit of his work. And the scriptural right applies to oxen, and it applies to men, and by implication, it applies to apostles as well.

Therefore, it applies to me, Paul, as it were. Now, and then Paul says, but I've got even more evidence than this. Not only do I have a natural right and a scriptural right, but I have a religious right as well.

After all, don't you know that, and here I'm quoting from verse 13, those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed at the altar.

So, you know, natural right, scriptural right, religious right. And if that isn't enough, if you're not convinced yet, then Paul says, try this for size.

[8 : 51] Jesus himself supports what I'm saying. So, you know, you've kept the really big guns till last, and now you're saying Jesus himself says it. The Lord himself commanded that. Those who proclaim the gospel should get their living from the gospel.

So, you're saying, Corinthians, can you hear what I'm saying? I, Paul, am an apostle. I've seen Jesus. I've been commissioned by Jesus. You're my workmanship in the Lord.

Therefore, I've got rights as an apostle. Those rights are to be fed, watered, and supported. The evidence of those is beyond judgment and comes from a whole lot of quarters. These are my rights. However, says Paul, I want you to hear something very important, and it's as though he's saying, listen very carefully to this. You see, I, Paul, your apostle, refuse to exercise my rights.

They are my rights. I have them, and I refuse to exercise them. I have refused it in the past, and I am going to refuse them in the present. Look at verses 12 to 15.

[9:50] Paul is clear. Let's have a look at it together. If others share this rightful claim on you, do we not steal more? 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.

Verse 15. I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing so that they may be applied in my case.

Indeed, I would rather die than that. No one will deprive me of my ground for boasting. Let me just try and explain what's going on, because it's a very intricate and somewhat complicated argument at this point.

You see, Paul has been engaged in missionary endeavor and journeys, and as he did so, he's had this open policy. That policy was to work at an ordinary job.

We hear of him in various parts of the New Testament being a tent maker. So, policy was work in an ordinary job. And he did this so that he could keep himself rather than have others support him.

[11:02] And his reasoning goes something like this, if I can sort of try and capture it for you. Christ confronted me. That confrontation by Christ makes me his slave.

And he commissioned me to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Now, I'm therefore under obligation. I have absolutely no choice about it. I must preach the gospel God has commanded me.

That's, I think, what verse 16 is about. See it there? Look at it with me. If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me.

And woe to me if I don't proclaim the gospel. In other words, God's told me, do it. And I must do it. I'm an apostle. I've been commissioned to do it. I must do it. Then comes verse 17.

For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward. But if not of my own will, I'm entrusted with a commission. So he says, you know, if I do this and I don't have to do it, then I've got some sort of reward.

[12:00] But even if I don't have that, you know, even if I'm not willing to do it, I'm under commission from God. I've got to do it. I wonder if you can see the logic because it's extraordinary and beautiful. Paul is saying something like this.

Look, if I were my own master, if I decided to preach the gospel off my own bat, then I could legitimately claim pay from churches.

What's more, I might even be able to claim a reward from God. After all, I would be doing God a favor in this case. But this is not so. I'm not a free workman on contract to God.

You know, it's not so I've subcontracted or whatever out to God to do the proclamation of the gospel. I am not a free workman under contract to God. I am Christ's slave.

Acquired by God. Put to work by God. As God decides. I'm in no position to claim any pay because, you know, slaves don't get it. I'm in no position to claim a reward.

[13:04] However, there's still one question to be answered. Can you see it in Paul's argument? And that question is whether there's any benefit at all to Paul. Does Paul have any reward at all?

And if he does, what is his reward? Well, verse 18. Have a look at verse 18. What 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. This is very cunning at this point.

Clearly Paul is saying, I do have a reward. And that reward is. Now this is counterintuitive at this point. Right. My reward is no pay for gospel preaching.

How does that work? Well, you see, because he's not paid. People can't turn down the gospel because they see the preacher making money from it. He preaches the free mercies of God.

[14:08] And he is preaching for nothing. Lends nonverbal support to the message. His free preaching illustrates the free nature of the gospel. Let me just.

Well, no, I'll press the point home and then I'll give you an aside. Can you see his point? It's really crucial. Paul's saying he's being consistent. He's saying, if I'm an evangelist, if I'm an apostle, then it is more consistent to refuse your right to be fed, watered and supported than it is to claim your

right.

It's more consistent with who you are and with the gospel itself. An evangelist shouldn't have his own rights in mind when he preaches. He shouldn't have his own advantage in mind.

He shouldn't have his own desires or inclinations in mind. It is the good of the hearers that should govern the life and action of an evangelist and apostle. Paul is saying that he's the one who's got perfect freedom.

Perfect freedom is the freedom not to run around asserting your rights. And he says that fits with the gospel. Perfect freedom is to be free, not to exercise your rights.

[15:19] Perfect freedom is to be free enough to make yourself a slave. That is freedom, isn't it? It is freedom when you can choose to be a slave.

Someone who can do this is truly free. You can make yourself free to be a slave of everyone for the cause of the gospel.

Look at verse 19. It's beautiful, isn't it?

You see, Corinthians are saying we've got rights. We want our rights. Give us our rights. And Paul says, I've got rights too. But it's actually more consistent for me to deny my rights and to be a slave of Christ because that illustrates the gospel.

Friends, just a little aside. I don't take any fees. Now, I am paid. You as a congregation and the other congregations here at Holy Trinity financially support me so that I don't have to do the work, do ordinary work.

[16:31] However, within that, I never charge fees for anyone to marry them, bury them, baptize them, any of those things.

Because it seems to me somewhat inconsistent to do so. Or something that is not good for me to do. Because I want to say to the people who come for those things, the gospel is free.

And I want my conduct to reflect that. That's just a little picture of what Paul is doing here. I have done what Paul has done in one context. I've worked in IT for five years and drew no salary, except for the last half a year, no salary from my church.

In order that the gospel, well, in fact, that others could be paid. It was a great privilege. And Paul is saying that when you can put aside your rights, it is right for Christian congregations to support their ministers.

But when you can put that aside, when you can afford to, and I was fortunate, I had that opportunity for a little while. Then, well, if you can do it, you ought to do it. So, though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave of all so that I might win more of them.

[17:44] Paul is so free that he can become all things to all people. And the goal? To win them to Christ. That's the aim of what he does.

Whether he is with Jews or Greeks or the weak or the strong or whoever. Can you hear what Paul is saying? He's saying that what he eats and who he eats with is really a matter of indifference to him in the long run.

He's a one-eyed man. A man with a consuming passion to bring others to Christ. Now, he will tinker with what he eats and who he eats with for a reason. He's a one-eyed man, though.

A man with a consuming passion to bring others to Christ. And look at verse 22. It states it plainly. The one who is really free is the one who is free to be all things to all people in order by all means to save some.

That's when you know you are free. Free to be all things to all people in order by all means to save some. Friends, I wonder if you can see Paul's point.

[19:00] The message about Jesus is a message that spells freedom. We ought to be the freest people in the world. The message about Jesus spells freedom. And Paul has responded to that message.

He's entered into the freedom that Christ has brought. And the very fact of his freedom makes demands on him. Freedom demands that he voluntarily take himself and place himself under bondage again.

a willing bondage. Not a bondage imposed from outside, but a bondage imposed from inside. A bondage to conform to the lifestyles of others if only he might see them one to Christ.

This then is the first demand of the gospel. Everything for the sake of the gospel. Friends, here is a very good test for you. Will you change your life so that people will become Christians?

Are you willing to do that? Because then you've been captivated by the gospel. Will you do without your rights so that people can become Christians and grow in Christian faith?

[20 : 08] Then you've been captured by the gospel. Will you do without things that you would otherwise have every right to have in order that people might come to know the Lord Jesus and grow in their knowledge and love of him?

If you can, then you are free in a way that this world just does not understand. When I was a chaplain at Macquarie University in Sydney in the early 90s, one of the students we befriended was a very, very able hockey player.

And he had played in state youth teams and the people in the know thought that he had the ability to play in the Olympics. And my friend had decided, had to decide whether he would push on in that direction or not.

He was about 19, 20 at the time. Part of his decision was to count the cost in terms of his personal life. And he told me what he thought it would require.

And I'm sure Eric and Alison know all about this. First, that is, they had a son who trained for this very discipline, this very sport.

[21 : 15] First, the Olympics that he would have to aim for, well, it's a different one, would be the 1996 or 2000 Olympics. In other words, for him, he had to plan for the next five to 10 years and set up a program for that.

Second, he would have to spend a few hours of every day simply hitting a hockey ball around.

That's what he told me he'd have to do. Third, he would have to go to formal training at least two nights a week.

Fourth, he would have to play every weekend in various higher level games. Fifth, he would have to give up or slow down on his studies. And this would simply be to get him into the Olympic team.

Once he was in the team, his whole life would be dominated by this sport. Friends, now, he may have been overestimating it. I don't know. You can ask Eric later on how it worked out for Andrew.

But, friends, learning a skill and becoming excellent is no easy matter, is it? It's no easy matter.

Training is difficult. It requires long hours.

[22 : 20] It requires long hours. Much pain. It needs discipline. It needs a long-term resolve. And the Corinthians knew this. You see, every two years, the Isthmian Games were held in their neighbourhood.

They understood. They knew that to have the barest hope of winning, a strict regime of training, was necessary. And that's what the Apostle Paul seizes on in the closing verses of this chapter. Look at 24 to 27. Do you not know that in a race, all runners, the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize?

Run in such a way that you may win. Athletes exercise self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we, an imperishable one.

So I don't run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air, but I punish my body and enslave it so that after proclaiming to others, I myself should not be disqualified. Can you hear it?

[23 : 19] Does he have his own rights? He punishes his body and enslaves it. Willingly, but that's what he does. Paul is using this athletic training to make a point about the demands of freedom.

He has already said that everything must be for the sake of the gospel. Now he makes the point that self-discipline is needed if that is to be the case. He himself, he says, is like an athlete in training, subjecting himself to rigorous regime of self-discipline.

He knew that he had to do this lest anything else replaced his first aim in life. Proclaiming the gospel. Winning people to Christ.

And that self-discipline would mean curtailing his rights. But Paul had counted the cost and he was more than ready for it. Why?

For the sake of the gospel. Friends, there is the chapter in outline and you can go and read through the details. I've tried to give you the thrust of it. What I'd like to do now is reflect on its implications.

[24 : 26] You see, Paul has led us into his mind and in chapter 11, verse 1, he tells us why. Have a look at it. Flip through chapter 11, verse 1. He says he wants to imitate Jesus.

One of the worst little stops in the, you know, paragraph, paragraphing of the Old and the New Testament is this one. Because it used to be that chapter 11, verse 1 was separated from chapter 10.

And it's not meant to be. And they're joined together. This is what makes Paul tick. What motivates him? It's this. God knows. Paul knows God's purposes for his world.

He knows God is an evangelist. He knows that Jesus died to bring people to God. He knows that God's ultimate God is to bring the world to know his son, Jesus Christ.

And Paul has taken that on board. He has soaked it up. He has imbibed it. He's made it his own. He's made God's purpose his purpose. He's determined that Christ is to be proclaimed as Lord.

[25 : 35] And anything that puts an obstacle in the way of this must be totally done away with. Everything must be subsumed before the purpose of God in Christ. Everything possible must be done in order to win people for God.

Paul is clear. He will become all things to all people in order by all means to save some. Notice the all that's missing at the end.

Even to save some he will be all things to all people in order by all means to save some. Friends, Paul's led us into his mind in this chapter as an example of what it means to be a gospel person.

Now, you and I are not apostles. I'm not. You're not. But Paul's God is our God.

God's purpose in his world has not changed an iota since Paul wrote these words. He is still an evangelist. He's still at work in the world to make his son known.

[26 : 44] He's still at work in the world to bring all things into submission to Christ. He still wants people to line up with his purpose in Christ. He wants that purpose to be our purpose.

His aim is to bring all into subjection into Christ and he wants that to be our aim as well. God has set us free in Christ. And then he says now I want you to become slaves again.

Not slaves to death this time. Not slaves to sin. Not slaves to Satan. But slaves to the God of all the earth and his purpose.

Slaves to real life. Slaves to the gospel and its proclamation. Slaves to the author of the gospel and its proclamations.

Slaves to the world that doesn't know Christ. You see, my reading of Paul is that Paul wants us to imitate him. He wants us to see that we are under obligation just as he was.

[27 : 47] So you can't just voice it off to apostles, I think. So tonight, I want to urge you to be like Paul. Be like an athlete. Train every muscle in your being in the race of making disciples of Jesus.

In fact, if you notice, that is our aim. As a set of congregations here at Holy Trinity, it is to make disciples of all nations.

So put aside every right you think you have if it stands in the way of people coming to know and grow in Christ. Friends, I wonder if you really are willing to do that. Are you really willing to give up your right so that people come to know Jesus?

Think of all those rights you have. You think, I'm not going to let God touch that corner of my existence in order that people can come to know Christ. We'd never put it that crassly, would we? But that's what I want us to ask. Put aside every right you think you have if it stands in the way of people coming to know and grow in Christ. Don't run without aim. That's what Paul's saying.

[28 : 57] But I think he's setting himself up as an example even though he is an apostle. Lead your body around as a slave. Subdue it to the aim of making Christ known in whatever way you can.

Even if it's just as Paul would go on to say in the next couple of chapters. Even if it's in your shopping down at the marketplace choosing what meat you're going to eat. Don't take shortcuts. Forget your rights.

If it's your right to comfort, put it aside. If it's your right to wealth, put it aside. If it's your right to fame, put it aside. If it's your right to security, be willing to put it aside. Become versatile and flexible.

Never lock yourself into a single way of operating and take risks for God and his gospel. And that may involve for some of you crossing culture gaps, getting out of cosy Christian subcultures and ghettos.

Remember you see you are God's person. God's person. Not your own. You are bought with a price. Therefore glorify God in your bodies.

[30 : 02] God wants you to be like his son. That's what will glorify him. And he wants you to be like the apostle Paul. He wants you to be all things to all people in order that by all means you might save some.

Now if you really take that on board and let it saturate all your existence, your life will change. And I urge you to. Because I think Paul's letting us into his brain for a particular reason so that that brain might become ours as well.

It'll look different to Paul but it'll have the same motivation underneath it. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father we thank you that Paul has done yet again what he's done a number of times in 1 Corinthians open the Corinthians up to his mindset a mindset formed by the gospel formed by his encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ formed by his knowledge of scripture formed by his observation of your way of working in your world but of course mostly formed by all that the Lord Jesus has done.

Father please help us to be people so formed we pray for us as a congregation we might be so formed and so shaped and Father we pray this so that the Lord Jesus might be glorified and Father we pray that you would be at work in our lives so that we might know what it is that we need to do in order to become all things to all people in order by all means to save some.

We pray this in Jesus name Amen.