

## **CHRISTIAN LIBERTY LIMITED BY A CONCERN FOR GOSPEL (2)**

### **1 Corinthians 9:19-27**

**January 22, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church**

On Friday the film *The End of the Spear* was released. Many of you looked forward with great anticipation to this contemporary portrayal of the lives of five missionaries to the Auca Indians in Ecuador: Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Roger Youderian, Ed McCully, and Pete Fleming. The movie is told from the perspective of the Waodani warriors who tragically took the lives of these men at the end of the spear. Of great interest to me in the movie is how these men went about communicating with these Auca warriors with whom they had no commonalities. The language barrier was overcome by communicating through a bucket lowered by a rope from the plane flown by Nate Saint. Jim Elliot would lower the bucket with a gift for the Waodani and as time went by, the Waodani would place gifts in the bucket in return. This technique served as the beginning of the gospel reaching this lost people group.

What I have just described is known as cross-cultural communications. It is an effort to become like another group by accommodating to their culture. Other missionaries have shown the value of these methods. William Carey in India, Adoniram Judson in Burma, and Hudson Taylor in China all used this principle of accommodation in their missionary efforts with great success for the gospel. While these men deserve the accolades they have received for their tireless efforts in cross-cultural evangelism, we must not lose sight of the truth that they took their cue from the greatest missionary the world has ever known apart from Christ, the Apostle Paul.

In our text this morning, Paul sets forth this principle of accommodation. We would do well to remember Paul's teaching in our efforts for the cause of the gospel, both at home and abroad. Over the past few weeks we have seen Paul's response to the church at Corinth as it relates to eating meat offered to idols. In chapter 8, Paul reminded them that while they had the right to eat the meat offered to idols, they should forego that right for the sake of the weaker brother. They were not to use their liberty at the expense of causing a weaker brother to sin. Then in chapter 9, Paul begins to offer his personal testimony of one who gave up certain freedoms for the sake of the gospel and yet remained free in all things not expressly forbidden in Scripture. As we saw last week, Paul illustrates this by not only refraining from eating meat offered to idols, but in relinquishing his right to be compensated for his work as an apostle. He expands this thought on the limits of Christian liberty in these verses by continuing to give a word of personal testimony.

#### **I. A Cultural Illustration (9:19-23)**

In verse 19, Paul makes a rather shocking statement, **"For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all."** Based on his apostolic authority, Paul once again states that he is **"free from all men."** No one had authority over him in the church. He had absolute freedom to live according to the rights granted him as an apostle. However, he chose to make himself **"a slave to all,"** not all things, but all men. I suppose there is no lower lot in life than being a slave. As Roger Ellsworth asks, "Is there any lower level of living than this: no rights or privileges; unable to freely come and go; no holidays, fringe benefits, or retirement – only toil, hardships, deprivation and abuse?" [*Strengthening Christ's Church*, 152]. However, this is the life that Paul chose. He would rather live as **"a slave to all"** rather than be a hindrance to the gospel. So, while he was **"free from all men,"** he turns right around and makes himself a slave

for the sake of the gospel. He then describes how this was born out in his life in dealing with three groups of people.

### 1. Jews (v. 20)

The first group of people that Paul relinquished his rights as an apostle to was to the Jews, **“To the Jews I became as a Jew.”** Paul was a Jew by birth. We read in Scripture that before his conversion, Paul was perhaps the Jew of all Jews.

**Philippians 3:5-6** – Circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

In his defense before the Jewish tribunal in Acts 22:3-5 Paul testified,

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today. <sup>4</sup> I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, <sup>5</sup> as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify.

So as to his Jewishness, there was no argument. But notice his wording in our text. He is not defending his Jewishness. These at Corinth would not dispute his bloodline. But he says, **“To the Jews I became as a Jew.”** After his conversion, Paul was no longer bound to the ceremonies, rituals, and traditions of Judaism. Though still a Jew by birth, he had been set free from the bondage of the Law. But he never lost the genuine concern that his Jewish brother would come to faith in Christ. As John MacArthur put it, “What once had been legal restraints now had become loving restraints” [*I Corinthians*, 212]. So Paul **“became as a Jew.”** He would be as Jewish as necessary within the limits of Scripture in working with the Jews. We read of his passion in Romans 9:

**Romans 9:2-5** – I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. <sup>3</sup> For I could wish that I myself were accursed, *separated* from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, <sup>4</sup> who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the *temple* service and the promises, <sup>5</sup> whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

And then in Romans 10:1, “Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for *their* salvation.”

So we see that Paul would go to any lengths allowed for his Jewish brethren. How did he do this? He did it by continuing to adhere to certain ceremonies and regulations for their sake. In Acts 21:23-26 we read of his keeping the Nazirite vow when he went to the temple in Jerusalem. He encourages his young protégé Timothy to be circumcised for the sake of the gospel (Acts 16:3). Was this necessary? No. But Paul would use any opportunity at his disposal to further the work of the gospel. He was modeling cross-cultural missions, using his heritage to communicate the gospel. Hence his statement, **“to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law.”** As MacArthur correctly states, “He did not believe, teach, or give the least suggestion that following the law was of any spiritual benefit. It

could not gain or keep salvation, but it was a way of opening doors to work among the Jews” (213-213).

## 2. Gentiles (v. 21)

The second group that Paul becomes a slave to in v. 21 is the Gentile, **“to those who are without law, as without law.”** Paul here refers to those who were not under the law of Moses. Paul spent his entire ministry in the Lord among the Gentiles. He was called as an apostle to them specifically. Of interest to us here is that the very thing that opened the door for him among the Jews, the Law, was a closed door for his work with the Gentiles. Therefore, where he **“became as a Jew”** in relation to the Law among the Jews, he became **“as without law”** among the Gentiles, setting it aside as to not be a hindrance to his work of the gospel.

This is important for us to see in our evangelism as well. What appears to bear gospel fruit with one person or group in a given set of circumstances may not work with another person or group or even with the same person or group under different circumstances. Keeping in mind that salvation is always the work of the Spirit and we are but the means God uses at times to bring one to Christ, we must be careful not to become too closely to one particular method. This is the danger I see in what others have dubbed “canned” approaches to evangelism. While there are certain things we must keep in mind when sharing the gospel (its specific content), there is a danger inherent in a 1-2-3 step approach to evangelism. The method often becomes the gospel rather than the gospel itself.

To make sure he is not misunderstood, Paul quickly adds, **“though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ.”** Paul did not mean in becoming **“without law”** that he was under no law at all. He was not outside of or **“without the law of God”** but **“under the law of Christ.”** This phrase has caused some confusion in theological circles today. Some say that Paul here pits the law of God, in particular the law of Moses with all its moral, civil, and ceremonial laws, against the law of Christ. They assert that the believer is no longer bound by any of the Old Testament law, moral, civil or ceremonial, only to the law of Christ. However, this is to misconstrue what Paul said and further, it goes against what Christ Himself taught in Matthew 5:17, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.” Paul understood what Jesus taught. As Geoffrey Wilson notes,

Since Christ had changed Paul’s relation to the law by fulfilling it on his behalf, he now recognizes the futility of that legalism which attempts to win salvation by its obedience to the law. But because gospel freedom is not lawlessness, Paul also acknowledges his abiding obligation to obey the moral law.” [1 Corinthians, 135]

Paul does not say here that the moral law has no place in the life of the believer. It still serves as a requirement for strict obedience, but not as a requirement for salvation as the Jews believed. He was not under the law of God in that way, but under the law of Christ. Hence his statement that he was **“not without the law of God.”** And as it related to the civil and ceremonial laws found in the Old Testament, they were no longer binding on him in Christ, so he was free to adhere to the customs of the Gentiles, eating what they ate, going where they went, and dressing like they dressed, even when it conflicted with the civil and ceremonial law of Moses.

### 3. The weak (v. 22)

The final group that Paul offers that he was enslaved to is the weak, **“To the weak I became weak.”** His reference here is not without difficulty. As we will see in a moment, Paul specifically states his purpose for becoming a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentile. It is so that he might **“win”** them to the gospel, a reference in those cases to their salvation. But **“the weak”** in this context refers back to those with whom this argument began in chapter 8, the weaker brethren who were saved, but immature in their Christianity and conscience. So Paul’s reference here is not so much in winning them to Christ, but in helping them to become stronger in their faith. He has already demonstrated that one of the ways he **“became weak”** for them was in relinquishing his right to eat meat offered to idols. We find his statement of weakness in 8:13, “Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.” Paul’s goal in winning **“the weak”** was to bring them to Christian maturity.

Paul concludes this section with the statement, **“I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.”** Again, Paul is not issuing a blanket statement of compromise, but he was willing to accommodate to the ways and norms of all men as long as it was scripturally allowable. Roger Ellsworth put it this way,

What he is talking about here is simply common sense in evangelism and in maintaining sound Christian relationships. It is what some call the ‘principle of incarnation’ in evangelism. Christ, in order to save us, had to become one of us, and if we are to win others, we must be willing to identify with them. [154]

So we see the importance in becoming **“all things to all men,”** in being willing to identify with those who are different than we are for the sake of the gospel. We must have a “slave” mentality in our gospel work. But not only does Paul share the *fact* that he became **“all things to all men”** but he also shares how he went about it, how serious he was in his efforts

## II. An Athletic Illustration (9:24-27)

Athletic contests were popular in the Greek world, particularly the Olympic games. But second in popularity were the Isthmian games, held every two years at Corinth. The games included six events: wrestling, jumping, javelin, discus throwing, and, most importantly for Paul’s analogy, racing and boxing. In these verses Paul uses the athlete to demonstrate the seriousness and vigor that he put into **“becoming all things to all men.”**

### 1. Run for the prize (vv. 24-25)

In v. 24, Paul asks, **“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only one* receives the prize?”** The obvious answer would be yes. Those that witnessed the games understood that there was only one winner. I once heard a Navy SEAL trainer comment that second place is the first loser. In any race, not everyone wins. As we will see in a moment, this is a reference to Paul’s understanding that not everyone who begins the Christian life endures to the end. Some will fall away and in doing so prove that they were never truly in Christ. Therefore, Paul exhorts, **“Run in such a way that you *may* win.”** Paul does not mean that only one person will ever be saved, but, like the runner, each must do his best, run to win. This would be exemplified by being “eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:14) by good works (Eph. 2:10).

Further, in v. 25 Paul writes of these, **“They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.”** You have probably seen pictures of the wreaths that the winners received

in these games. They consisted of nothing more than twisted wood that was perishable but valuable to the winner nonetheless. It was their trophy for competing and winning. Paul's point is that if these were willing to work so hard for something of little comparative value, then how much harder should the Christian be willing to work for that which is **"imperishable!"** What is this **"imperishable wreath"**? Paul tells us in 2 Tim. 4:8, "in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing." That crown is reserved only for those who finish the race. You see, finishing the race is winning the race in the Christian life. So Paul exhorts them, "Run to win. Finish the race. Claim your crown."

## 2. Process of training

In v. 25 Paul writes, **"Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things."** He further shares in v. 27, **"I discipline my body and make it my slave."** This is a reference to the rigorous training an athlete goes through to win. Participants in the Olympic games were required to train for at least ten months prior to the games in order to qualify for participation. The same was probably true for the Isthmian games. An athlete could not just show up and say, "I want to play." There was a strict process of training that had to be adhered to prior to the games. This required **"self-control in all things"** and **"discipline."**

The same is true in the Christian life. Christians must devote themselves to self-control and self-denial, such as, in this case, forfeiting their rights for the sake of the gospel and weaker brethren. Just as an athlete must adhere to stricter dietary standards and sleep habits, so the Christian must give up certain things to compete more effectively. That is part and parcel of **"becoming all things to all people."**

And, like the athlete, the Christian must give great care to their spiritual development through spiritual disciplines. While this should be obvious, I cannot tell you how many people I encounter who are spiritually frustrated because they do not take the time in this area of spiritual disciplines. But we must recognize that those who are not disciplined will struggle mightily in the race and may not finish at all. The believer must take time in the spiritual disciplines. At a minimum, the believer should take heed to their:

- Bible intake
- Prayer
- Worship

## 3. Focus on the goal

Paul says, **"Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air."** If an athlete, in this case a runner and a boxer, expects to win, then they must focus on the goal. The runner must focus on his lanes and ultimately the finish line. We would not think much of a runner that ran a race aimlessly, wandering around from lane to lane and never finishing the race. We would probably say he did not belong in the race.

The boxer must also be able to remain focused on his opponent. Some of you may remember the *Rocky* movies where Sylvester Stallone gets bludgeoned Apollo Creed and others to the point of being literally out cold on his feet. Well, that is a movie, and those that have succeeded in the ring in this way are the exception, not the rule. The boxer must be able to remain focused on his opponent, dodging his blows and delivering the right punch at the right time in the right place. He cannot expect to win by simply swinging wildly and **"beating the air"** as Paul calls it.

So there is a specific purpose, an ultimate goal, that Paul says the believer is to have. That goal is specified by the words **“to win.”** Six times in these verses Paul uses the word **“win”** and once uses the word **“save”** in v. 22. Paul’s goal was that others would come to know Christ. His purpose in **“becoming all things to all people”** was for the particular purpose of leading them to Christ. The reason he used **“all means”** at his disposal was so that he might be able to use those means in saving some. He did not become **“all things to all people”** just so he could **“fit in”** with a particular group. If that was his goal, he certainly went about it in the wrong way. Because of his intense passion **“to win”** Paul was not the most popular person in the world.

Likewise, he did not use **“all means”** to simply gratify the desires of the flesh. Some seek to use all means with an impure motive. They cloak their own selfish, worldly desires in evangelistic clothes. They give lip service to the purpose sharing the gospel while all the while the particular situation they place themselves in is for their own selfish desire to be like the world and fulfill their own sinful desires.

*Illus.* – We recently had a tragic illustration of this in Oklahoma City. On the night of Jan. 3 a Tulsa pastor, also an Executive Committee member of the Southern Baptist Convention, was arrested on a lewdness charge for propositioning a male plainclothes policeman posing as a male prostitute outside a hotel. After posting bond, the pastor told a television station in Oklahoma City that he **“was set up”** and was in the area **“ministering to people.”** He told Baptist Press that he was **“pastoring to police.”** He has subsequently resigned from both his church and his position on the Executive Committee.

I do not share this illustration as a reason to pass judgment on this man. We need to pray for him, his family, and his church. This calls for compassion, not shame and ridicule. However, this event illustrates how a person might **“use evangelism”** as a pretext to gratify the desires of the flesh. We must be careful that we do not fall into this trap, heinous or otherwise. We must examine our motives. Ask yourself the question, **“What is the real intent of my heart in this particular action? Is this action really Christ-centered or me-centered?”** And then, when the action is complete, ask yourself, **“Did I share the gospel? Did my words and actions honor and glorify Christ and the gospel or did they obstruct the cause of Christ?”**

But Paul’s goal in the gospel was not just toward others, but he was concerned about the gospel in his own life as well. **“I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it”** (v. 23). He shares his concern a bit differently in the athletic metaphor, **“I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified”** (v. 27). Paul sought to win others so that he might share in the blessings of the gospel. He stayed focused on the gospel so that he would not be disqualified from the race. His goal was to be in the winner’s circle. Paul did not fear losing his salvation. He himself wrote of that impossibility. But his concern was that he receive all of his rewards for his service. In other words, Paul practiced what he preached.

## Conclusion

**“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”** While I cannot be certain, I would suggest that Jim Elliot had Paul’s text in mind when he said this. He understood that the things of this earth were perishing and that only those things that are done for the cause and glory of Christ will last. He understood it so well that he gave his life for it. However, there is a tribal group in Ecuador and beyond that now understand the same thing. They understand that it was Jesus’ death at the end of a spear that matters. Do you understand

that this morning? And if you do, are you willing to “**become all things to all men**” so that they might know Christ as their Lord and Savior, even to the point of laying down your life? Are you running the race set before you with a purpose?