

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Free To Be A Slave I Corinthians 9:15-23

When seeking to reach the Hindus for Christ, should missionaries wear the native clothing? When reaching the Muslims, should Christians break for prayer three times a day as is the Muslim tradition? Or a little closer to home, when reaching the music world, should Christians let their hair grow long and dress funky? Or when reaching the busters or baby boomers should Christians adapt the music of the church to their culture? These are issues which the Apostle Paul deals with in principle.

This section is all about reaching all types, kinds and races of men, women, boys and girls for Christ. God has left each Christian on this earth for the purpose of winning others to Christ. He has planned that Christians should be the instruments He uses to reveal Christ to people. God is the ultimate soul winner, but He uses men as vehicles to carry the gospel to people. In a secondary sense, as God's instruments, Christians are soul winners and they are to be diligent in seeking to bring people to Christ. . and he who wins souls is wise (Prov. 11:30).

In I Corinthians 9:15-23, the word "gospel" occurs four times, the word "win" five times and the word "preach" five times. This section is climaxed by the words of the Apostle Paul who

said, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

In this section of Scripture, we see Paul's great desire to be a soul winner. He had a passion to see people saved, and he proclaimed the message of Jesus Christ without compromise, knowing full well that it was the power of the gospel coupled with the work of the Holy Spirit that would finally save men. I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it (the gospel) is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.. (Rom. 1:16).

Perhaps you are rationalizing at this point and saying to yourself, "Well, Paul was an Apostle who had the gift of evangelism and was called to be a pioneer missionary to the Gentiles. Surely, I have no calling of this type and winning souls is not my bag." It is true Paul was a gifted evangelist with a special calling from God, and God saw fit to give him a wider and greater ministry than He will ever give any of us. Yet, we have been sovereignly called to salvation by God just as Paul was, and we have been called to witness for our Lord.

As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. My prayer is not for them alone (the original twelve disciples). I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message (Jn. 17:18,20).

The Lord Jesus has commanded all Christians: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation (Mk. 16:15). Each one of us is to have a heart for evangelism as did Paul, although none of us will ever be as effective as he because he had a special calling. Evangelism, however, is to be at the heart of our Christian experience and without that concern, we will never enjoy God or glorify Him as we ought.

We must put I Corinthians 9:15-23 in its context. This section is part of the three chapters in which Paul is dealing with the subject of meat offered to idols. It was alright to eat the meat as long as it did not cause a weaker brother in conscience to stumble into sin. Meat sacrificed to idols was a doubtful thing or a questionable practice for Christians in Corinth. Paul's point was that Christians had the right to eat but they were to set aside that right if it offended and caused a weaker brother to stumble. The essence of his argument was that a Christian should never exercise any right if it is going to be a detriment to another person. In I Corinthians 9, Paul shows from the example of his, own life how he gave up rights to be more effective in his witness for Christ. In I Corinthians 9:1-14, he showed how he had the right to be paid wages as Apostle and minister of the gospel, but he relinquished that right so as not to bring any black mark against Christ and the gospel. Now in 9:15-23, Paul will show from his life how Christ and the gospel were the most important aspects of his life and how he was willing to forego all rights to see men and women, boys and girls, saved.

FREE TO GIVE UP WAGES 9:15-18

But I have not used any of these rights. Paul had a right to wages (good wages) but he refused to use this right because he did not want the Corinthians to connect the giving of money with the preaching of the gospel. There were in the Roman Empire bands of philosophers and teachers who would travel from city to city teaching people for money. The people might think Paul was preaching the gospel for mercenary reasons; therefore, he took no money and worked with his hands to support himself in the ministry.

And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. Paul had absolutely no intention of exercising his right to receive wages. He was not hinting to the Corinthians that he really wanted support in the future.

I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. Paul boasted that he took no money for the preaching of the gospel from the Corinthians. He could face his critics and enemies with confidence because of his total disinterest in receiving money for his preaching. They could not charge him of being money-hungry or building an empire for himself. He would rather die than have that charge leveled against him.

I wonder what the Lord thinks about mega-churches and televangelists today which are constantly pleading for money on radio and TV: Do they give the unsaved a valid reason to discredit Christ and the gospel? I think they do, and this is one of the major scandals of modern day Christianity.

Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Paul was called by God to preach the gospel; that was his obligation, duty and stewardship. It was not optional for him to preach the gospel. God made Paul a slave to Christ and the gospel and he had no choice as to whether he would preach the good news. "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (Lk. 17:10). Paul could never boast in preaching the gospel for that was his God ordained duty as a minister of the gospel.

Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! Paul felt a pressing necessity to preach the gospel. It was his charge to do so. He even wishes a "woe" or disaster upon himself if he does not preach the gospel. In these modern days, we are not good at emphasizing duty, and we do not like the thought of discipline if we do not do our duty. Yet, Paul says both are his lot. He was obligated to preach the gospel and so is very other Christian. Not all Christians are called to a special ministry as was Paul, but all Christians are debtors to declare the gospel and to be faithful witnesses for Christ on this earth.

If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward. What Paul seems to be saying is that if he preached the gospel willingly as an option, he would have a reward, but this was not his particular lot in life. He was called. He had to preach out of necessity and obligation. If he preached of his own free choice, he would merit reward, but he did not preach out of choice. He had to preach the gospel.

If not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. Paul was a slave and steward of Christ, obligated out of duty to preach the gospel. He had absolutely no choice in the matter. All Christians are not specially gifted evangelists, but all Christians are to evangelize. All Christians are bound by God to declare the message of Christ to the world. Not all Christians are going to see great soul-winning fruit, but all are to be witnesses for Christ. As God gives us opportunity, we should be prepared to speak for Him. Every Christian should be able to present the gospel in simplicity, and all are bound by God to do this as their duty. It is not optional as to whether we speak for Christ. It is mandatory. Jesus said it well, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (Matt. 10:32-33).

What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it. Paul did not get rewarded for preaching the gospel; that was his duty. His reward came when he gave up his right to be paid as a gospel minister. He had no option as to whether he would declare the good news of Christ. He did have an option to preach without receiving wages. He preached out of duty but was rewarded because he gave up his rights to be paid.

Paul practiced what he preached. He gave up more rights than any other Christian to see the gospel proclaimed in power. He would not ask the Corinthians to do anything that he himself would not do. No pastor should ask people to give up their right of personal time to serve Christ if he is not willing to do so or to give up the personal right at sleep to pray if he is not willing to do it. No pastor should ask his congregation to give up the right to have more material things unless he is willing to do the same for the cause of Christ.

What he (Paul) is saying is simply that the thing that motivated him, the thing that drove him to work late hours at night making tents so he would earn a living and would not have to be supported by anybody in the church in Corinth, was the sheer delight it gave him to bless and enrich someone else without taking a penny in return. It was the joy of giving that Paul was experiencing. There are so many religious racketeers around that it is fun sometimes to surprise people by not asking anything for your ministry (Ray Stedman).

FREE TO BE A SERVANT OF MEN 9:19

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, Paul had the status of a free man in Christ. He was under obligation to no man, no elder board, no congregation, no denominational hierarchy to conduct his life in questionable practices. Yet, in that free status, he made himself a voluntary slave of everyone. Paul was free from religious traditions, man-made scruples and secular prejudices. He was free in Christ, for his soul had found the real secret to liberty. Being set free internally, he made himself externally a slave or a servant to all men. Out of his own volition, he relinquished his own rights in order to win as many people as he possible could for Christ. Martin Luther said it well, "A Christian man is a most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

To win as many as possible. Paul set aside his right in order to win as many people as he possibly could to Christ. Paul willingly made himself a slave to all men that they might come to Christ and be set free from the bondage of sin.

He wanted to win as many as possible for Christ, which tells us that there is a godly jealousy for souls. What is the greatest thing that have ever happened to you as a Christian? Your answer surely is, "My conversion to Christ." What then is the greatest thing you can do for another person? Win him or her to Jesus Christ!

Paul said that he was the one who would win men to Christ, and this might shock some so-called hyper-Calvinists. A hyper-Calvinist is one who holds to the Doctrines of Grace but is not evangelistic and also has a negative spirit about those who do not hold the Doctrines of Grace - Calvinistic pride. Did Paul not know the doctrines of grace? Did he reject or compromise the teaching of sovereign election? No, never. What Paul was teaching is that, while sovereign election is true, it is also true that God carries out His plans and purposes through the cooperation of individuals.

Paul gave up his rights because he was called to preach the gospel. In order to be successful in that endeavor, he relinquished his rights so he could win as many people as possible for Christ. No price was too high or sacrifice too great to see a person come to a saving relationship with Christ.

FREE TO WIN MEN 9:20-22

Accommodating to the Jews (9:20)

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law. When Paul sought to win Jews and Jewish proselytes to Christ, he became like them. He was referring to manners nor morals, methods not ethics. The Jews had many cultural prejudices, religious traditions and customs they held as sacred and part of the Jewish faith. The ceremonial and civil laws of the Old Testament, with all the traditions which had grown up around them, placed the Jews in bondage, but Paul, a converted Jew, was free in Christ. Yet, in order to reach the Jews for Christ, Paul accommodated himself to the Jewish law, custom and tradition. No Jew would ever give an ear to Paul's gospel if he arrogantly mocked them for their traditions. Paul, therefore, does not mock their scruples but respects them. He does not offend their sensitivities but rather conforms to their customs. He willingly places himself back under the Mosaic Law in order to remove any Jewish prejudices that might keep them from hearing the gospel. Paul wanted to save as many people as possible and was willing to go to any lengths to do so.

(Though I myself am not under the Law), The Mosaic Law consisted of 613 commands. Paul was not under the civil, ceremonial, social or dietary aspects of the Law although he was most certainly responsible to do the moral aspects of the Law. He was free from the external Law of the Jews because of Christ, but if the only way he could reach the Jew was through placing himself back under the Law with all of its legalistic tendencies, he would do it in order to win Jews for Christ.

So as to win those under the law. Paul had a passion to see his fellow Jews saved and no personal sacrifice was too great to see this accomplished. Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved (Rom. 10:1).

A buzz word among missiologists and missionaries is contextualization. By this it is meant that creative ways are used to reach different people groups in their particular culture. It is being sensitive to the non-Christian, neutral mores of society so as not to hinder people from accepting the gospel. All aspects of a culture are not inherently evil but some are.

Contextualization means that as we present the gospel to other people groups we change the forms which surround the gospel but we do not change the content of the gospel. Contextualization is nothing more than adapting the Christian message to a particular culture without compromising biblical truth. To evangelize Jews, it would be helpful to worship on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, observe Jewish holidays, use folk music and dance, use Jewish idioms or whatever. If evangelizing the Muslims, it may be well to assume certain postures in prayer, pray three times a day, use regular times of reflection and devotion, use houses of worship which resemble mosques or whatever. However, the message of the gospel is never changed.

Accommodating to the Gentiles (9:21)

To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law)... When Paul was with the Gentiles who had no written religious law as did the Jews, he did not keep the Jewish Law because he was free in Christ. Yet, he would accommodate himself to the Gentile cultural traditions and prejudices if it would help him reach them for Christ. Paul would attend their athletic events, uphold their legal justice, eat pork with them and enter into debate with their philosophers. However, in doing this, he would break no moral laws of God to humor people. He was a free man in Christ but always under the law of Christ who ruled in his life at all times. Paul's methods might change, but his message never changed. Nor did his morals and ethics change, for he was guided by the law of Christ which is the law of love, and this law is expressed in the moral law of the Old Testament and the moral law of the New Testament. All Christians are under the law; however, that law is not the Mosaic Law but a higher law--the law of Christ.

So as to win those not having the Law. Paul has a passion to see the Gentiles saved and no personal sacrifice was too great to make this happen.

Notice that Paul became all things to all men only in those things indifferent. He never compromised the doctrines of Christ, never watered them down, never sinned against the dictates of God's law or his conscience for the sake of evangelism. But he did take great pains in those matters of indifference to win others to Christ. It is necessary to stress this point because many have abused this passage to allow for all kinds of ungodliness and for the neglect of proclaiming the full counsel of God. Paul's duty was to God first, but when it came to his duty before men, he always put others first (Table Talk, May, 1996).

Accommodating to the Weak (9:22a)

To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. There were some unsaved Gentiles who were on the fence concerning Christ and commitment to Him. They were weak because they had superstitious beliefs and hang-ups concerning meat sacrificed to idols or drinking wine or observing religious holidays. Paul was a total abstainer from these things if they ever became a hindrance to a person coming to Christ. Paul would not abuse his liberty so he could be the most effective witness for Christ he could possibly be.

FREE TO BECOME ALL THINGS TO ALL MEN 9:22b

I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. Paul was willing to restrain any liberties he had in Christ to reach men for Christ. He would not sin against God to save the soul of another, but he would deny himself any external freedom to reach that person for Christ. The rights of God he could not give up, but he might resign his own rights, and very often did, for the good of others and the cause of Christ.

Paul said, "... that I might save some." As Dr. D. James Kennedy says, "This statement is enough to shake some hyper-Calvinists right out of their TULIP tree." Did Paul think he actually saved people? No, but he was so taken up with the plans and purposes of God in salvation that he felt the keen responsibility for being an instrument in the salvation of people. We know Paul pleaded with people, reasoned with people, persuaded people and exhorted people to trust Jesus Christ. He clearly understood that it is God who saves, but he also knew he was an instrument through which the gospel was being preached, and he never gave up on a person's salvation until God did! Paul was driven in his experience by the realization that Christ does save people and that he could have a part in seeing the lives of men and women gloriously changed.

Paul also said, "I might save some." He never expected everyone he talked to about Christ to respond positively. He did not say "all" or "most" or "many" but "some," for he knew if he faithfully gave forth the gospel the Holy Spirit would regenerate some and they would believe. He had assurance that some would come to Christ under his ministry if he faithfully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. Our task as Christians is to get the gospel to every person in the world. We are under command and obligation to do it. God will save some whom he pleases, and he pleases to save all who trust in Jesus Christ. This kind of confidence helps the Christian to get his eyes off numbers and to faithfully witness for Christ.

Paul also said, "that by all possible means I might save some." He was for different methods in evangelism. Methods may vary from one generation to another, one locality to another or one country to another, but the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified for sinners must never change. Any means is acceptable to God-- friendship evangelism, mass evangelism, door-to-door evangelism, media evangelism through TV and radio. The means change but the message never changes. We must never compromise the full gospel of Jesus Christ.

What are the essentials of the gospel or good news? Jesus Christ died for sinful people to deliver them from eternal judgment. All those who believe Christ died for their sins and rose from the dead to give them eternal life and bow to Christ as Lord, acknowledging His right to rule over them, will be forgiven for every sin n they have ever committed, given eternal life, granted the Holy Spirit and be guaranteed a place in heaven.

Every one of us should be personally involved by one means or another in reaching people for Christ. You can become part of an Evangelism Explosion ministry or you can learn to share the Four Spiritual Laws of Campus Crusade, or you can just speak to people about Christ and tell them what happened to you when Christ came into your life. You can get involved in an evangelistic small group or have an evangelistic coffee or dessert in your home. You can pass

out tracts or my sermon notes. You can go preach at the Rescue Mission or a nursing home.

You may join an evangelistic singing group, get on the missions committee or involve yourself in personal and group prayer for world evangelism. You can get involved with Christian Women's Club, Young Life, Youth for Christ or Child Evangelism or other groups which are reaching out for Christ. Right now there is a group going out every Thursday evening from HBF visiting our neighborhood and there have been neighbors who are interested in knowing more about Christ. Whatever you do, get involved!

FREE TO SHARE WITH OTHERS 9:23

I do all this for the sake of the gospel. Paul's whole life was lived in relation to getting the gospel out to the lost world. His personal interests were subjected to the one main goal of preaching the gospel and winning people to Christ. Everything in his life was programmed to preaching the gospel. He had a one-track mind about evangelism, and so should we.

That I may share in its blessings. Paul preached that he might be a sharer with others in the blessing of salvation. He refused to hoard the good news of Christ. He wanted others to know because Christ changes lives. He wanted everyone to have this wonderful salvation so he could share it with them.

CONCLUSION

Christian, what is your heart beat? Have you come to the place your experience where you can say, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some"? God sovereignly saves sinners, but He does not save apart from the means of evangelism, prayer, dedication and commitment. Do you witness for Christ? Is evangelism a priority in your thinking? Is world missions foremost in your thoughts? Do you make attempts to invite people to church (statistics will show that one out of four will come)? Do you make time in your schedule to do things which are directly related to reaching the world for Christ? Remember, Christian, without evangelism you and your local church will dry up spiritually.

For you who are not Christians, there is hope for you. The Bible says some will be saved. It never teaches that all will be saved. Only those who trust in Christ as Lord and Savior will have entrance into heaven. You can get among the some who are saved and have a personal relationship with Christ when you trust Him for deliverance from sin and eternal judgment. Trust Christ and you will come to understand you are numbered among God's elect. After you come to Christ, then you will want to share Him with others.