

Living On Mission
1 Cor. 9:19-23
Shades Mountain GIC
April 2021

It's great to be with you...introduce my family...

Pic of my family.

If you brought a Bible, turn with me to 1 Cor. 9.

What does it mean for every person within the church to do their part in joyfully spreading the Gospel? Paul's words to the believers in Corinth are a challenge to all of us.

First let me say a few words about context: Jesus called us to reach our Jerusalem, then our Samaria, then the ends of the earth. In doing so, he gave us concentric circles to think about-- our city, our region, our nation and world.

If your city is like Nashville Tennessee, it quickly becoming a city of transplants. People are moving to the cities, and they are coming from other countries, as well as from all corners of this country. In our neighborhood just down the street, there are people from Pennsylvania, New York, California, as well as many from India and far-off places. The demographics seem to suggest that a growing number of people have moved in from other places.

For those with a missionary heart, this is an incredible opportunity. In case you haven't noticed, we live in a religiously diverse nation—a country that has fully embraced a smorgasbord of worldviews. If the trends continue, the Bible Belt will collapse in the coming years, and our country will continue its drift away from absolute truth.

It doesn't take a time machine to tell where things are headed around here. Moral relativism is on rise--the notion that all truth is under revision and that ethics are situational. In other words, nothing is always wrong or always right—it depends where you live and what the majority decides. Any person in our society who says they have the truth is immediately viewed with suspicion.

Yet, in all this, Jesus stands in such stark contrast with culture. Jesus was not a person that straddled the fence. He said, "I am the way, the truth, the life. No one will come to the Father unless they go through me." Jesus claimed to bring something to the Earth called truth.

The Bible makes many people uncomfortable today. 1 Tim. 2:4...

**God...wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.
-- 1 Timothy 2:4 (CSB)**

Implications of that verse are obvious. There are two: 1) people are either saved or unsaved (God wants everyone to be saved) and 2) people must come to a knowledge of the truth. Jesus said it is "the truth that sets people free."

Christians have always tried to convert people. That is the ultimate goal, and the passion of every missionary.

Famous missionary and martyr, Jim Elliot, once said:

"Father, make of me a crisis man. Bring those I contact to decision. Let me not be a milepost on a single road; make me a fork, that men must turn one way or another on facing Christ in me." --Jim Elliot

This is the mission of the church! All Christians have to ask themselves the convicting question: when people encounter me, do they feel compelled to know more about Christ, or less? What does it mean to "do evangelism" today, in this context, when most people on your street believe that all roads lead to heaven? How do you speak truth to a person who doesn't believe such a thing exists?

In the New Testament, there was a man named Paul, who became a missionary and he constantly interacted with people from various worldviews. Listen to what he says, about how he handled himself when evangelizing. You may be surprised by his approach.

Although I am free from all and not anyone's slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law — though I myself am not under the law — to win those under the law. To those who are without the law, like one without the law — though I am not without God's law but under the law of Christ — to win those without the law. To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some. Now I do all this because of the gospel, so that I may share in the blessings. -- 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (CSB)

Did you take speech class in high school or college? If so, you remember that the first step in communication is to analyze your audience. As Paul spoke to different types of people, he adapted his style. He didn't use the same words, or the same approach with every person.

There's so much for us to learn here, and apply today. He says two things here, about his evangelistic strategy:

Paul's Strategy

1. My life goal was to win as many people as possible, to Christ. (v.19)

He said, "I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible." (v.19)

If you are here today as a good-hearted skeptic, you are not yet a Christian, I hope you won't write me off for saying that I'm trying to win you to Christ today. Wouldn't it be weird if Christians weren't trying to win people to the faith? If we truly believe what the Bible says about the after-life, and who gets to spend eternity in heaven, why in the world would we keep that quiet, sharing the news with no one?

Paul was unapologetically focused on winning people. He sincerely believed that Jesus Christ was the Savior of every culture, that the Gospel was the deepest need of the human heart. When you get the God-piece right, everything else falls into place.

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

Obviously, Paul saw himself as a fisher of people, casting all kinds of lures into the water. He knew that certain types of "fish" would respond to certain types of bait. He changed the kinds of messages depending on where he was fishing. So, when he entered a new city to spread the message of Jesus, he would make adjustments. We all do this. You don't speak to your boss the same way you speak to your little brother.

Paul modeled for the church a fluidity in relating the Gospel, which means that every church should constantly change its approach as its audience changes.

There's a definition of insanity that I've always found insightful:

Insanity: doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

So, let's talk about evangelism today. Since the pool of Christians in America is shrinking every year, is it time for us to adjust our approach, as Paul did? Are the old ways still working?

Just look at the stats on mainline denominations. Church buildings all over the country are being torn down for parking lots or repurposed as community centers. Church attendance is in decline, but the average age of the churchgoer is increasing. Churches are getting smaller and older. There is now a *graying of the Gospel* across our land. Nothing wrong with having lots of gray hair in the seats every Sunday, so long as there are young people scattered all over the room, with passion for the future.

Has the Gospel lost its relevance? I don't think so. It never has, never will. We just need to pay attention to the culture and continue to adapt our methods.

Paul watched the winds of culture and adjusted his sails. It's too bad more Christians aren't following his example.

I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people.

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What does he mean by that? Slavery?

In Old Testament times, when a person fell into deep financial debt, he could offer himself as a slave to the man he owed. He'd spend a few years working it off. This kept him out of jail, allowed him to continue to see his family, but he could no longer do all things the way he previously did, just as he wanted. His personal preferences were no longer the priority. In order to reach people, your personal preferences must move to the back seat.

Paul says, "I do have my personal preferences, but I have set them aside that I might reach more people.

In order to win people to Christ, he had to think more about what they needed than what he wanted.

Even though it was uncomfortable, he had to embrace their culture where he lived, applauding it where he could, and oppose it only where he must.

Now, what kind of people was he relating to back then? He lists three:

- The Jew
- The Greek
- The weak

He says:

2. My plan was to build rapport with all kinds of people.

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law — though I myself am not under the law — to win those under the law. To those who are without the law, like one without the law — though I am not without God's law but under the law of Christ — to win those without the law. To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak.

Notice how Paul recognizes the diversity of the fish he was seeking to catch. Each one had a culture, and its own set of idols.

What is culture?

Culture: the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or social group.

So, let's take Jews for example. When Paul hung out with Jewish people, what do you think they wanted to talk about? Their customs and social institutions. Isn't the temple beautiful? Isn't the Sabbath a great idea? What are your plans for the next Passover? What is the scripture for the week at the synagogue? Who's your favorite rabbi? These were the questions of the culture.

If Paul was going to build a relationship with unbelieving Jewish people, he would have to know these words and take an interest in their lives—this is Paul's version of How to Win Friends and Influence people.

Culture represents what people prefer to talk about. Did Paul like talking about these things? I don't think so. I think he had to plug his nose and swallow at times. He was no longer under the law. But they were.

Fast forward 2000 years and move to Nashville, TN. What do people like to talk about where we live? Mainly three things.

- Sports. College football, the Titans, the Preds.
- Country music. You had to know that when you moved here.
- Their kids. This is a kid-centered culture. People love to talk about their kids and what their kids are into.

If you would say out loud any of these things, on your street, then you will enjoy a life of solitude.

1. Sports are for unsophisticated people who can't read.
2. Country music isn't real music.
3. Kids should be seen and not heard. Particularly, your kid should be seen or not heard.

Just say any of those three statements out loud on your street and you will enjoy plenty of time to yourself. Why? Because those are important parts of the culture here.

In order to build relationships with people, you can't put down what they exalt. You have to affirm the culture where you can, and oppose it where you must.

We will never win the culture by boycotting it. We win by engaging it, and presenting the Gospel in winsome ways to those who will hear it. And there are always some that wish to hear it.

That's what Paul was talking about. He took an interest in the people around him. He accepted them where they were, along with their customs.

One time Paul was planning a trip into a Jewish territory, and he wanted to take his non-Jewish protege Timothy, along with him, but there was just one problem.. Acts 16 says:

Paul went on to Derbe and Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a believing Jewish woman, but his father was a Greek. The brothers and sisters at Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him. Paul wanted Timothy to go with him; so he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, since they all knew that his father was a Greek. -- Acts 16:1-3 (CSB)

If you ever complain about the cost of a mission trip again...Timothy's got you beat.

Paul asked Timothy to make a personal and painful sacrifice in order to build rapport with the Jewish audience. They would not accept a Greek who would not show respect to their culture. The most shocking part of the story is that Timothy agrees to the plan.

This was not a moral decision, but a missional one. Timothy knew that in order to be trusted by the Jews, he would have to affirm their custom. That's an extreme example, but it's a principle of evangelism.

This obviously raises all kinds of missiological questions. If God called you to serve as a missionary in a tribal village, would you join them when they started sprinting around a fire and cut themselves with knives, singing to the moon god? NO, that would violate your core belief to worship Christ alone. Paul is not talking about becoming sinful in order to influence others.

Craig Blomberg, in his commentary, clears this up, by saying:

Paul's words have massive implications for strategies of outreach and friendships with unbelievers, though they can be exaggerated. Paul is not promoting pure situation ethics... Paul would never have said "to the thief I become like a thief," or "to the adulterer I become an adulterer." --New Testament scholar, Craig Blomberg

Paul is not promoting sin, but the participation in culture that does not violate the conscience.

But it wasn't just the Jews he was dealing with. Also the Gentiles, the Greeks—those who did not know Jewish laws, or care. These people grew up worshipping a pantheon of gods and sacrificing to the list of deities. Paul had to learn how to love those people also, becoming a student of their cultures.

He said:

To those not having the law I became like one not having the law...

The majority of people on the planet in his day, had never read the Scriptures before.

And many people here haven't either. Thirty years ago, in the South, most Christians believed the Bible before they read it. Why? Because they believed the people who preached it. They grew up in that culture. That may be you today. You were on the cradle roll at your church, from the time you were in the nursery. Like a goldfish in water, people in the south have been submerged in Christian worldview. But as I said before, more and more people have not had that history.

It won't be long now, when a person becomes a Christian in Nashville, they will stand against the dominant culture, they will choose to walk into the wind. This changes things dramatically.

When I was a church planter in Denver, I had to change my approach in preaching. When I was a pastor in West Tennessee, I was strongly opposed to projecting Bible verses on a screen as I preached, because I wanted people to carry their Bibles to church, and I wanted them to learn how to turn to the various books and speak Christianese. And then one day, a childhood friend came to hear me preach while I was preaching in another city. My friend Eli saw on Facebook that I was coming to his 'town, and so he stepped inside a church for the first time in decades. He did it for me. He did not grow up in church. He did not bring his own bible.

As I started the sermon, I told everyone to open the Bible to the book of Acts. Eli looked at my 6 year old son, who quickly took his bible and rifled to the page, beating his brothers in the sword drill.. Eli slowly reached forth and slipped out a pew bible exploring the Table of Contents. After the sermon, he said, "Dude, I've never felt more out of place in my whole life! And I've never felt like a bigger moron than when your little boy opened to the page."

That experience changed my mind. I had to change my preference in order to reach people. My preference would be for people to bring their own bible when they came to church, but that was actually alienating my unbelieving friend.

We as Christians love boldness but we lack empathy. We are not willing to suspend our own thinking long enough to consider how an unbeliever thinks when he/she walks into the room. We are often trapped in our own traditions.

The church should not be a place where people are trying to preserve their favorite songs and rituals at the expense of making the message accessible to outsiders.

This was what Paul was all about—presenting the message in the most winsome and considerate way.

When I was with the Gentiles, I did not ask them what they thought about the Torah, or the tabernacle. I did not quote Malachi or refer to Ruth. I was much more gentle with my nonreligious friends:

Paul clearly exercised the most imaginative and sensitive adaptability in his relationships with unbelievers...Paul was the most versatile of men, never locked into

any single way of operating and always listening to God's ideas in each new situation—a genuine spiritual chameleon. --David Prior

I love the way he says that. As you know, a chameleon is a reptile that constantly changes colors to mix in with the surroundings. Paul did that—not in a two-faced kind of way, but in a tender kind of way. He was sensitive to the people around him.

He hung out with Jews. He hung out with Greeks. But there is one more group he mentions. He wanted to influence them also: the weak.

v. 22:

To the weak I became weak, to win the weak.

It is hard to tell if he's talking about young Christians or non-Christians. I believe he is actually talking about brand-new believers—people who were still getting to know God, and struggling to stay on the Way. Paul wanted his lifestyle to woo them also.

The context is the key to understanding this phrase. If you are holding a bible, let your eyes drift up to the top of chapter 8. The heading says something like, "Concerning food sacrificed to idols." This was a huge controversy in the early church, a clash between cultures. I'll explain.

The Jewish people who came to faith in Christ the first century shopped at the grocery store differently than the Gentiles that came to faith in Christ. Here's how.

In the pagan temples, animals were sacrificed to a host of gods, and temple prostitution took place. In that belief system, a man believed he was pleasing the gods if he engaged in sexual behavior with a stranger and brought an animal to be offered. All kinds of dark things happened there. When that animal was slain, only a portion of the meat was used for the service, the rest was taken and sold at the King Soopers.

Because Gentile Christians had come out of that culture, they could NEVER feel good about buying that meat and serve it to their children. They would have felt wounded or weak in their conscience.

The Jewish believers however, had no such baggage, and no beef with buying that meat. They thought it was a great deal—good stewardship to save money and buy things cheap. They ate the meat with no problem.

And guess what, all these people started going to church together. And having one another into their homes. Cultures collided. The Gentiles were outraged that the Jews would eat that meat. They judged them for doing so.

Since the church was in turmoil, Paul weighs in and says in 1 Cor. 8:7...

Some have been so used to idolatry up until now that when they eat food sacrificed to an idol, their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not bring us close to God. We are not worse off if we don't eat, and we are not better if we do eat. 1 Cor. 8:7-8

Paul puts this argument in its proper place—food is not a spiritual issue. Nobody is written out of the will for chowing down some meat. However, have such horrible memories with pagan sacrifice that when they eat that meat, they feel dirty inside and it puts them in a dark place.

Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I won't cause my brother or sister to fall. -- 1 Corinthians 8:13 (CSB)

What does he mean—cause them to fall into sin? I thought he just said it wasn't a sin to eat the meat? He says it's a sin to some people, because its wrong to violate your conscience. You should never engage in an activity that makes you feel inwardly dirty or a disappointment to God. The Gentiles had a weak conscience when it came to that meat, because when they ate it, their minds went back to really bad memories—to times that they wish had never happened.

What does this mean for us today? It means that Christians should not engage in any practice where one of two things happens:

- You go home feeling guilty.
- You intentionally wound other peoples' hearts.

Paul said, "If eating that burger causes my brother to feel bad, then I'll order the soup and salad."

Bottom line:

My personal freedoms are not as important as my personal relationships.

Winning people to faith in Christ and growing them in Christ is what I want my life to do:

Same slide:

To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some. 9:22

Now, with the remainder of my time, let me address some of the guiding principles that flow from our understanding of 1 Cor. 9, becoming all things to all people. How does this apply to the way we do church here?

The Church Staying on Mission

- **Church people must be continually challenged to spend time with unchurched friends.**

If you attend a worship service every week, serve for an hour on a ministry team, and participate actively in a Small Group--then you are hitting a triple every week, but it doesn't get you home. Hearing a sermon, helping in a ministry, and going to group—that is huge! But to hit the home run, you've gotta spend some time with someone who "has not the law." You make room in your life for cross-cultural experience. Identify with an unbeliever.

Pray for people in your life who are far from God. Spend time with them. Care about them, and keep on caring about them even when they show no interest in you.

- **The church should hold on to traditions where there is "chapter and verse" and stand ready to release the others.**

Jesus gave us two main traditions—things he wanted us to keep doing year after year, never letting them fall away. The first one is called Baptism, a word that means "to dunk." Jesus commanded us to introduce others to Christ, and once they receive him, they should be dunked in water as a symbol of their sins washed away, and their new life raised up in Christ. That's tradition #1.

Tradition #2 is called the Lord's Supper. We are not told how often to conduct Communion, but Jesus simply says to do so regularly. This ritual represents our ongoing commitment to Christ, the reminder that it was Jesus's body broken and blood shed that gives us hope beyond the grave—and nothing else.

That is the second tradition. You can find them clearly in the Bible, along with the command to continually observe them.

Every other tradition should be annually under review. When people transfer to a church from another church, they often go to the pastor and ask when he will start _____ tradition. And the blank is a tradition that was a part of their last church, and it was something that was very meaningful for them, as they grew up. The best thing a pastor can say is: "We don't have a vision for that." And let the awkward silence roll.

The church must always remain open to fresh ideas, but we don't want to keep rewinding the tape and reusing stuff that worked 15 years ago.

Listen to what one biblical scholar writes after reading Paul's words:

Paul's missionary encounter is precisely what is needed today. We live in a post-Christian culture where the ground has shifted dramatically...Business as usual won't cut it anymore. Because the landscape has changed so drastically, there's a good chance that any paradigm that's familiar to us, any paradigm we're comfortable with and that just feels right to us, is unintelligible to the average person...The church

needs to make adjustments. We must learn the hopes, the questions, and the language of our neighbors... --Stephen Um

And this is our hope as a church—that we will not build a culture that feels just right to church people—with traditions that we all loved as kids. No, strive to become a church that reaches all kinds of people, especially those who have never come in before.

Principle #3:

- **The church should avoid offending people unnecessarily.**

When Paul says that if eating meat causes his brother to stumble, then he will never eat meat again—this has implications on how we should conduct ourselves as a church.

A church should not set the goal of being super-cool. There is a line that we can cross where we are just trying to hard to be relevant. Some pastors even say to those who feel uncomfortable: “If you don’t like it, leave. We need your seat for outsiders.”

I think pastors should be sensitive to all of the flock, not just the new people. I don’t feel like adding lots of edgy things are always necessary to connect with the unchurched crowd. That’s called overcontextualization. There comes a point when we are trying too hard to fit in.

There’s a balance. We strive to create a peaceful, contemporary expression of the body of Christ. We are focused on strengthening believers and introducing those outside belief. We want to speak the words of Christ in a culturally-sensitive way, with as few distractions as possible. The power is not in us; the power is in the pure message:

Paul wrote in Romans 1:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek. -- Romans 1:16 (CSB)

Lord, help us to be a people that affirms the culture where we can, that builds rapport with all types of people, so that, that we might win some.

