

Challenges Christians Face

Paul's Pattern of Serving All Men

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

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Paul's Pattern of Serving All Men

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of Christian liberty. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Paul's Pattern of Serving All Men."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23:

¹⁹For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. ²²To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

Introduction

In her book, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, church historian Ruth A. Tucker says, "No other missionary in the nineteen centuries since the apostle Paul has had a wider vision and has carried out a more systematized plan of evangelizing a broad geographical area than Hudson Taylor."¹ He was born in Yorkshire, England in 1832. By the time of his death in 1905 he had recruited more than 800 people to go and share the good news of the gospel with the people of China. The missions organization that Hudson Taylor

¹ Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 173.

started was known as the China Inland Mission and shortly after his death became the largest missions organization in the world. In 1964 its name was changed to the Overseas Missionary Fellowship to capture better its expanding focus on East Asia.

There are many reasons why Hudson Taylor is regarded as the greatest missionary since the apostle Paul. He had an unswerving faith in God, a laser-like focus on reaching the unreached millions of people in China, a magnetic personality that drew people to his cause, and a knack for organization.

But there is another reason for Hudson Taylor's success as a missionary in China. Listen to how Ruth Tucker puts it:

Early in his travels, Taylor discovered that he was a novelty and the people were far more interested in his dress and manners than in his message. To him there was only one logical solution: to become Chinese, to adopt Chinese dress and culture. Jesuit missionaries had long taken up Chinese ways and had ministered with great success, but most Protestant missionaries considered such behavior a radical departure from acceptable missionary methods. For them, Christianity was not "kosher" unless it was clothed in Western culture.²

Hudson Taylor was simply doing what the apostle Paul had done as he evangelized the Mediterranean world. Paul adapted to the culture of the people to whom he was ministering. He believed that in varying cultural settings he should forsake his rights to pursue his own cultural preferences in order to minister to others for the sake of the gospel.

Review

Let's briefly review how Paul arrived at that conviction.

You may recall that *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* was in fact Paul's response to a letter he had received from them. Six times in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul said,

² Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 176.

“Now concerning. . .” (7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; and 16:12). And six times Paul responded to a question or issue raised in the letter that he had received from the Corinthians.

In 1 Corinthians 8:1 Paul said, “Now concerning food offered to idols. . . .” This was the third of six issues. All of chapter 8 deals with the issue of food offered to idols. The Corinthian Christians were engaged in a debate about whether it was okay to eat meat offered to idols. This was an issue on which God had not clearly revealed his will. It was therefore a debatable matter, and the Christians in Corinth were divided over the issue. Some said it was okay to eat meat offered to idols; others said it was not okay.

Paul responded to their question by setting down a foundational principle in 1 Corinthians 8:13: “Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” Paul would never do anything to cause his brother in Christ to stumble. He was willing to limit his Christian freedom in order to love his brother in Christ. His principle was that Christians must deny themselves their rights for the sake of the gospel.

In chapter 9 Paul now illustrated from his own life the very principle he laid down in chapter 8. His principle of self-denial for the sake of the gospel in chapter 8 was illustrated by his pattern of self-denial for the sake of the gospel in chapter 9.

In verses 1-18 of chapter 9 Paul’s illustration had to do with his self-denial regarding material support. In verses 19-23 Paul’s illustration has to do with his self-denial regarding cultural preferences. He was willing to forsake his rights to pursue his own cultural preferences in order to minister to others for the sake of the gospel.

Lesson

So, in our lesson today, we learn that we must forsake our rights and serve others for the sake of the gospel. I would like to develop this lesson by examining Paul’s approach to ministry.

1. Paul’s Purpose for Ministry (9:19).
2. Paul’s Strategy for Ministry (9:20-22a).

3. Paul's Purpose Restated for Ministry (9:22b).
4. Paul's Reasons for Ministry (9:23).

I. Paul's Purpose for Ministry (9:19)

First, let's look at Paul's purpose for ministry.

In most of our English Bibles there are seven sentences in verses 19-23, our text for today. These are perhaps the most purpose-filled sentences in all of Paul's writings because each sentence contains the *hina* conjunction in Greek, which is translated as "in order to, for the purpose of, so that,"³ or simply as "that." Paul gave a very clear statement of his approach to ministry in these verses.

In verse 19 Paul stated his overarching purpose for ministry. He began by saying in verse 19a: **"For though I am free from all."** Paul was a **free** man; he was not a servant. In the ancient world, a servant could not do whatever he wanted to do. He did what his master directed him to do. By restating that he was **free from all** (cf. 9:1), Paul made it clear that he did not have to conform himself to the preferences of others.

Nevertheless, Paul voluntarily made himself **a servant to all** (9:19b). He gave up his rights to his own preferences in order to serve other people. This is like Hudson Taylor giving up his Western clothing for Chinese clothing.

Why did Paul do this? What was his purpose? Why did he become a servant to all? Paul said in verse 19c: **". . . that I might win more of them."** He did this to win people to Jesus Christ. He did it in order to reach the unreached millions of people with the good news of the gospel of God's grace and mercy. His desire to see people come to faith in Christ overrode his own cultural and personal preferences and rights.

Like Paul and Hudson Taylor, you and I are certainly free

³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1996), 784.

from all. However, are we willing to make ourselves a servant to all that we might win more of them to Christ?

You say, “But I am not a missionary.” That is true. But every one of you is called to ministry. You are called to make Christ known in your neighborhood, in your school, in your workplace, and so on. Are you making yourself a servant that you might win more of them to Christ?

“How do I do that?” you ask.

II. Paul’s Strategy for Ministry (9:20-22a)

Let’s see how Paul did that by examining his strategy for ministry.

In verses 20-22a Paul explained his strategy for reaching four groups of people. So, I want to note briefly his strategy:

1. To the Jews.
2. To those under the law.
3. To those outside the law.
4. To the weak.

I want you to note that with each group he says that his purpose was to win them to faith in Christ. Paul’s purpose in ministry to each of the various groups was to win them to Jesus Christ.

A. *To the Jews (9:20a)*

First, note Paul’s strategy to the Jews.

Paul said in verse 20a: **“To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews.”**

The apostle Paul was born to Jewish parents in Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 22:3). So, in what sense did Paul, a Jew, become **“as a Jew”** when he already was a Jew?

Paul was actually quite cosmopolitan. It is true that he was Jewish by ethnicity. But he was also a Roman citizen by birth (cf. Acts 22:28). He was able to move very comfortably from one group to another. It would be like some of you, for example, who

are bicultural and bilingual. You are able to move very easily between the two different cultures you know.

So, when Paul visited Jewish communities he was able to talk like them, eat like them, dress like them, and so on.

It is not always easy to adapt to the local culture, as Hudson Taylor found out. This is how Ruth Tucker describes it:

Becoming Chinese was a complicated ordeal for the blue-eyed, sandy-haired, Yorkshire-bred Taylor. The baggy pantaloons “two feet too wide around the waist,” the “heavy silk gown,” and the “flat-soled shoes” with turned up toes would have been trial enough, but to blend in with the Chinese people, black hair and pigtail were essential. Taylor’s first attempt at dying his hair was a fiasco. The top blew off the ammonia bottle and burned his skin and nearly blinded him. Fortunately, a missionary doctor was close by, and within a week Taylor had recovered sufficiently to be out and about again. . . . But the end result was worth the pain. With some “false hair plaited” in with his own to form a pigtail and with some Chinese spectacles, Taylor blended in with the crowds: “You would not know me were you to meet me in the street with other Chinese. . . . I am not suspected of being a foreigner.”⁴

Hudson Taylor, following the apostle Paul, adapted to the local culture so that he could win them to Jesus Christ.

B. To Those under the Law (9:20b)

Second, note Paul’s strategy to those under the law.

Paul said in verse 20b: **“To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.”**

Paul was still talking about Jews in this sentence. However, he was now talking about Jews and their Jewish religion who were **“under the law.”** That is, they were trying to find favor with God by submitting themselves to follow the Old Testament law. Paul was willing to abide by Jewish ceremonial regulations, observe

⁴ Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 176.

special days, or refrain from eating certain foods if doing so would help him **win those under the law**.

For example, when Paul asked Timothy to join him in his ministry he had him circumcised “because of the Jews who were in those places” where he wanted to minister (cf. Acts 16:3). Paul understood that circumcision did not earn one favor with God, but it did open the door to ministry to the Jews who were **under the law**.

Paul did not believe that obedience to the law earned one favor with God. That is why he said, “**Though not being myself under the law.**” However, he voluntarily followed certain Jewish religious customs **that he might win those under the law**.

C. To Those outside the Law (9:21)

Third, note Paul’s strategy to those outside the law.

This was Paul’s strategy to Gentiles. He said in verse 21: “**To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.**”

Paul was willing to adapt to Gentile customs when he was ministering to Gentiles. Of course, since he was born and raised in Tarsus, which was an important international city, he was quite comfortable moving in Gentile circles. He was able to eat with them, dress like them, speak like them, and so on.

However, so as not to be misunderstood, Paul made it clear that he was not talking about ignoring or violating God’s moral law. And so he added (in the parenthetical statement), “**Not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ.**” Paul’s point was that **the law of God** was interpreted in light of Christ’s coming, and thus became **the law of Christ**.

The reason Paul adapted to Gentile customs was **that he might win those outside the law**.

D. To the Weak (9:22a)

And fourth, note Paul’s strategy to the weak.

Paul said in verse 22a: **“To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.”**

Now, who were **the weak**? **The weak** were those who did not have a correct understanding of biblical truth. They were the ones who said that it was not okay to eat food offered to idols (cf. 8:1). They are the ones who made rules where God had not said anything. They were actually mistaken about debatable matters.

Nevertheless, Paul accommodated himself to them. He was willing to restrict his rights so as not to put any barriers between himself and them. He did it so **that he might win the weak**.

So, this was Paul's strategy for ministry. Basically, he did whatever was not a violation of God's law in order to become like the people to whom we was ministering.

III. Paul's Purpose Restated for Ministry (9:22b)

Third, let's look at Paul's purpose restated for ministry.

Paul said in verse 22b: **“I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.”**

Foregoing his rights to pursue his own preferences, Paul submitted to everyone **that by all means** he might bring some to faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul's passion was to see people converted to Christ. He did not want to do anything that would become a barrier to that person becoming a Christian.

How does that apply to you? You are not a missionary. But you are a neighbor, a teacher, a student, a friend, a professional, a business person, and so on. God has called you to minister in the place of your calling. So, wherever you are you can serve others. You serve them by helping them, encouraging them, and eventually telling them about Jesus. And you must do so!

Chris Heuertz is the international director of Word Made Flesh, an organization that helps the world's poor. In his book *Simple Christianity*, Heuertz writes that one night in particular stands out in all his world travels. While walking the streets of

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Kolkata, the city where Mother Teresa ministered in India, Heuertz and his companions—Josh, Sarah, and Phileena, Heuertz’s wife—stumbled across a person lying under a filthy, fly-infested blanket. A three-foot trail of diarrhea was making its way toward the gutter. It was obvious to anyone passing by that the person under the sheet was either dead or dying. Heuertz writes:

My pal Josh tapped the body on the shoulder to see if the person was dead. The body moved. Josh pulled the blanket down from the face that it covered to see a helpless young man, maybe twenty-two years old and visibly stunned by our approach. As soon as he realized we were there to help him, he began weeping uncontrollably. A crowd gathered. He continued to cry.

We didn’t have much to work with, but our friend Sarah grabbed a bottle of water and some newspaper. She began cleaning the young man, wiping the diarrhea off with the newspaper and rinsing him with the water. We asked him his name. Tutella Dhas. He was lost, afraid, alone. His body was a leathery-skinned skeleton, and his bulging eyes accentuated the shape of his skull. He kept crying.

We tried to get a taxi, but none would stop. The crowd grew. No one wanted to help. Two more friends happened to be walking down the street just then, and they were able to find a taxi. They took Tutella Dhas with them and headed off to Mother Teresa’s House for the Dying. Phileena, Sarah, Josh, and I stood there in disbelief.

I lifted my head and caught sight of a church and its sign less than five feet where we found the dying Tutella Dhas. The sign read, “All are welcome here.” It may have been what inspired someone to drop Tutella in front of the church. But was he welcome? People from the church watched as we helped Tutella, yet the gate remained closed.⁵

Are you and I, like the apostle Paul, willing to become all things to all people, that by all means we might save some? In two weeks we hope to open an overflow in the double classrooms to

⁵ Christopher L. Heuertz, *Simple Christianity* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 61-62.

accommodate the growing number of visitors. Will you be willing to forego your right to a chair in the sanctuary and take a turn once every two months in the overflow that we might save some?

IV. Paul's Reasons for Ministry (9:23)

Finally, notice Paul's reasons for ministry.

A. For the Sake of the Gospel (9:23a)

First, Paul became all things to all people for the sake of the gospel.

Paul said in verse 23a: **“I do it all for the sake of the gospel. . . .”**

Paul wanted to see the gospel proclaimed to all who had not heard it.

B. To Share in the Blessings of the Gospel (9:23b)

And second, Paul became all things to all people to share in the blessings of the gospel.

Paul said in verse 23b: **“. . . that I may share with them in its blessings.”**

Paul wanted all people to share in the blessings of the gospel. He wanted them to be in the family of God with him.

Conclusion

Paul, Hudson Taylor, Chris Heuertz, and others teach us that we must forsake our rights and serve others for the sake of the gospel. We do it because this is the example of Christ. He set aside his rights and served others—to the point of dying in their place—for the sake of the good news of the gospel.

May God help each one of us to do so. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

O God, give us Paul's passion for ministry. Give us his approach to ministry as well. Help us to forsake our rights so that we can serve others for the sake of the gospel.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and love your brothers and sisters well and be willing to forsake your rights for the sake of the gospel.