

The Purpose of Freedom

1 Corinthians 9:18-23

¹⁸ What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel. ¹⁹ For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. ²⁰ And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; ²¹ To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. ²² To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. ²³ And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.

The church at Corinth had written a series of questions to the Apostle Paul. Their Grecian culture had a significant, controlling influence on their lives. So when they came to Christ – became new creatures in Christ, and members of His body, the Church – they had questions. They had questions, and Paul, through the Holy Spirit, gave them answers. There were problems with partisan division in the church (ch. 3 and 4) and sexual immorality (chapter 5). Some of the believers were suing other believers in a court of law (ch. 6), just like others in their culture. They had questions about marriage (ch. 7).

In this series on the Christian use of liberty, we are studying Paul's timeless answers about this test case: whether or not to eat meat offered to idols, answered in 1 Corinthians 8, 9, and 10. In the last message, we noticed that Paul made a distinction between merely doing his duty and his desire to passionately reach for a reward. **"¹⁸ What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel."** Paul had chosen to give up his right to financial support among the churches he was planting. He wanted to completely set aside any possibility that he was preaching the Gospel for money.

[Just/ Just Don't] Tell Me What to Do

When it comes to questionable things, wouldn't it be easier just to tell people what to do in each and every case? Of course, we must always do this with children, but most adults would rightly object to this approach. Paul could, and often did, give direct commands to the believers at Corinth, backed by divine authority. But he had no desire to "lord it over their faith" (2 Corinthians 1:24, 1 Peter 5:3) but to help them enter into joy. To do so, they must learn to stand firm in their faith. All of us are trying to find our way forward as we address the issues of our day, standing firm in faith. We all need to remember that we are not studying these issues in a neutral vacuum. All of us bring backgrounds and experiences to the table in this discussion. Some react to their conservative background; others to their liberal upbringing.ⁱ This problem is compounded by believers reacting to each other: alternately charging those with whom they disagree as "legalistic lawgivers" or "lustful libertarians."

Timeless Principles and Paul's Example

In 1 Corinthians 8, 9 and 10, the Lord gave us timeless principles and Paul's example – which transcend any culture and can transform believers in every culture. You and I know that our culture is changing. Within the next two to three decades, many in our congregation will be in heaven. But there is a generation coming along behind us that needs the best, Biblical answers that we can give them. It was the same way with Paul and the Corinthians. Simplistic, "pat answers" simply will not do. In fact, the applications of these principles may change from culture to culture. So Paul gave us a model as to how to live and how to answer inquiries about questionable things. He taught us how to think so that we could see how to please the Lord in what we do. When asked about eating meat offered to idols, he

didn't merely say, "do" or "don't," and this approach is instructive to us. Paul spent two chapters (chapters 8 and 9) giving principles, and then gave warnings and some applications in chapter 10. By the inspiration of the Spirit, Paul also gave us his example. In 1 Corinthians 4:16 and 11:1, Paul urged the Corinthians to imitate his example. We can use these to "discern both good and evil" (Hebrews 5:14).

Warning

But be warned: our pagan culture is making inroads into the church. There are those here who remember when discussions of Christian liberty were mainly about makeup, movies, modesty, music, dancing and going to places where alcoholic beverages were sold. But today, some use "Christian liberty discussions" to include homosexuality, changing gender, psychotropic drugs, drinking alcohol as a beverage and ordaining women as pastors. In an online interview, Philip Yancey, (a purportedly Christian author) wrote, "When it gets to particular matters of policy, like ordaining gay and lesbian ministers, I'm confused, like a lot of people. There are a few--not many, but a few--passages of Scripture that give me pause. Frankly, I don't know the answer to those questions. I'm a freelancer, not an official church representative, and I have the luxury of saying simply, "Here's what I think, but I really don't know," rather than trying to set church policy."ⁱⁱ C.J. Williams commented, "We live in a more permissive atmosphere, where perhaps the greater challenge is the misuse of Christian liberty, rather than legalistic additions. The prevailing "spirit of the age" will often dictate the changing tendency either to add to God's law or to subtract from it. We seem to live in times of subtraction. Christian liberty is often used as a cloak for vice, and the term "legalist" is often misapplied to any scrupulous believer."ⁱⁱⁱ

All Things to All Men

Against this backdrop, today's text can be very helpful to us: **"¹⁹ For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. ²⁰ And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; ²¹ To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. ²² To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. ²³ And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you."** In our modern culture, a phrase in verse 22 has been stretched to mean what it cannot mean and never meant. The phrase, **"I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."** Does this mean that Paul could stretch to adjust to anyone's morals or scruples? Some have taken this to mean something like, *"When in Rome, do as the Romans do,"* adopting the customs and morals of the community where you are. Is this what it means? No, it cannot be. The Corinthian Christians had been converted out of their Grecian culture. Virtually the entire book of First Corinthians was designed to turn them away from their cultural practices. Nothing in 1 Corinthians 9 could overturn Paul's resolution not to avoid ensnaring believers again in their pagan ways (1 Corinthians 8:9 and 13). So, in context, becoming "all things to all men" cannot mean "when in Rome, do as the Romans do." David Garland commented that D.A. Carson "justly cautions that this is not granting 'a license for unlimited flexibility.' Paul is flexible, but he is not 'infinitely elastic.'"^{iv} "His accommodation has nothing to do with watering down the gospel message, soft-pedaling its ethical demands, or compromising its absolute monotheism. Paul never modified the message of Christ crucified to make it less of a scandal to Jews or less foolish to Greeks."^v We would think that no one tries to twist the Gospel message in this manner. Yet it happens all the time.

Dwight Longenecker cites Terry Mattingly's description of the ministry of Billy Graham. He entitled his article, "Billy Graham: All Things to All Men." "Graham said he was preparing for his 1986 Mission France

Crusade and, well, he was concerned about how — in a culture rich in Catholic history — to deliver his altar calls. Thus, he brought the subject up while meeting with [Pope] John Paul II. How did that go? Graham shared language close to the following, and I heard him use variations on this in the 1987 crusade in Denver's Mile High Stadium. As part of his call for people to come forward to make a public profession of Christian faith, he said: 'Maybe you were baptized as an infant, but you feel like you've lost touch with those vows that were made long ago. Come forward and claim those baptism vows as your own.' The Graham team had Catholics, including a few priests, trained to help talk to Catholics who came forward."^{vi} Is this really what Paul meant by "all things to all men?"

A Slave to All, 19-22

Paul used his freedom to make himself a slave to all, for the sake of the Gospel. The word "servant" in our translation translates the Greek [*doulos*] meaning "slave." Paul took the words of Jesus seriously.

Jesus "said to them all, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Jesus dealt the death blow to Satan's power and reconciled sinners by His sacrificial death on the cross. He rose again from the dead to show His power over death — even the death of the cross. Jesus set aside His rights to reconcile you to His Father. Paul denied himself — setting aside his rights — in order to serve all men. How far did Paul take this? Consider the words of verses 20-23:

²⁰ And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; ²¹ To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. ²² To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. ²³ And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you."

- Unto the Jews, Paul became as a Jew in order that he might gain the Jews. 20

"First, within Scriptural limits he would be as Jewish as necessary when working with Jews."^{vii} Paul was intent on breaking down barriers between Jewish people and the Gospel.

- To those who were under the Law, Paul became as under the Law. 20

In Acts 21:20-26, Paul willingly took part in a Jewish ritual in order to pave the way for the Gospel ministry.

Since we are to be imitators of Paul, how might we apply the principle of 1 Corinthians 9:19 with Paul's example? Well, if you invite your Muslim neighbors over for supper would you put pork on the menu? The Quran (2:173 and 6:145) prohibit your Muslim friend from eating pork. Your Christian liberty gives you complete freedom to eat and serve pork chops and ham. But will you?

Or if you are trying to reach your devout Catholic neighbors what kind of meat will you grill on your cookout next Friday? (Believe it or not, the McDonald's Filet-o-Fish sandwich was developed in Cincinnati when an owner noticed that hamburger sales always fell on Fridays.) Devout Catholics have been taught to do penance on Fridays by avoiding the meat of warm-blooded animals. They eat fish.

Or if you are trying to disciple a recently-converted Hindu what will you order when you share a meal at the restaurant? That Hindu may still believe that eating beef is sacrilege. Would you deny yourself and "go vegetarian" that evening to follow the principle and example of 1 Corinthians 8:9?

- To those who were without the Law, Paul became as without Law. 21
 - Clarification: Paul was not outside the law of God; He was under the law of Christ.

The expression “those without the Law” refers to Gentiles. Paul may have avoided using the expression “the Greeks” so as not to imply that he participated in pagan hedonism. Paul was brought up and had lived as a devout Jew under the ceremonial law (see Philippians 3). But Christ had fulfilled the ceremonial Law (Hebrews 10:1); and His people were no longer under the civil law of Israel (in the theocracy). But Jews, Gentiles and all believers are still under the moral law (as evidenced by Romans 13:9-10 and Matthew 22:37-40). Paul taught that every believer is under “the Law of Christ” helping to carry the burdens of others (Galatians 6:2). In all these things, Paul took advantage of his liberty in Christ in order to make himself a slave to others. His goal was that the Gospel would spread quickly and rapidly.

- To the weak, Paul became as weak in order that he might win the weak. 22

In chapter 8, “the weak” referred to new Christians who were overly conscientious about meat offered to idols. Paul commanded the Corinthian believers to take care not to become a stumbling block to these believers (1 Corinthians 8:9). But in chapter 9, the focus was on the lost – to avoid hindering the Gospel (1 Corinthians 9:12). In the context, “weak” here probably refers to the lost (as it does in Romans 5:6). Paul had limits; he did not eat the idol food to become like “the weak.” But he did seek to set aside any possible barriers to the Gospel.

- Paul’s personal principle was that he made himself to be all things to all men that he might by all means save some. 22

In the context of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, “becoming all things to all men” means the freedom to become a slave to all men. It does not mean that every questionable practice can be called “evangelistic.”

For the Gospel’s Sake, 23

“²³ And this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.”

Why did Paul set aside his rights to make himself a slave? He did it for the sake of the Gospel. Paul was determined to be a partner with the Gospel. Will you make this same commitment? Will you imitate Paul as he imitated Jesus? They set aside their rights in order to reach for the reward.

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ⁱ Author Philip Yancey once wrote, “I could tell you stories--and in my books I do tell stories--about the church I grew up in. For sheer meanness and closed-mindedness, it rivals any church I've seen.” Candace Chellew-Hodge, quoting Christian author, Philip Yancey. “Amazed by Grace, An Interview with author Philip Yancey” 2004 accessed at <http://www.whosoever.org/v8i6/yancey.shtml>. Author and preacher Chuck Swindoll wrote, ““It is not uncommon for me to meet people who have come out of strict fundamentalist ministries where they were bruised and wounded by a grace killer who presented Scripture in such a rapid-fire, harsh manner, they felt beaten by “the letter of the Law” rather than led and comforted by the Spirit of liberty. Having come out of such a climate many years ago, I understand whereof I write.” Chuck Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening*, Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996, p. 232.

ⁱⁱ Candace Chellew-Hodge, quoting Christian author, Philip Yancey. “Amazed by Grace, An Interview with author Philip Yancey” accessed at <http://www.whosoever.org/v8i6/yancey.shtml>

ⁱⁱⁱ C.J. Williams, “The Heart of the Matter: Avoiding Legalism,” *Reformed Presbyterian Theological Journal*, RPTJ 01:1 (Fall 2014), p. 40

^{iv} David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007, p. 436

^v *Ibid*, p. 436

^{vi} Fr. Dwight Longenecker, “Billy Graham: All Things to All Men,” February 27, 2018, accessed at <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/longenecker/billy-graham-all-things-to-all-men> (The author, with whom I was once acquainted, is a graduate of Bob Jones University who attended Oxford, became an Anglican priest, and is now a Catholic priest serving a parish in Greenville, South Carolina.)

^{vii} John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1984, p. 212