

1 Corinthians 8-9

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 November 2014

Preacher: Duncan Peters

[0 : 00] I'd like us to turn back to 1 Corinthians chapter 9 and to look particularly at the part from verse 19 to verse 23, the last paragraph that we read there.

Okay, being all things to all men has something of a bad name. If someone is all things to all men, we think of someone being a kind of chameleon who changes color according to the environment they're in. Someone with no principles, who changes their principles according to the environment they're surrounded by. Think of Groucho Marx's comment. He said, these are my principles and if you don't like them, I have other ones. Or we think of someone being like a jelly who sort of just fits into any and every mold. So that's the kind of thing we think of when we think of being all things to all men. That's probably how we use the phrase ourselves. And yet this phrase was originally used by the Apostle Paul and he used it about himself and his own approach to mission and to communicating the gospel message to different kinds of people.

And if you get to know the Apostle Paul from the book of Acts or from his letters in the New Testament, you'll find that he's anything but unprincipled. A more principled person would be hard to find.

Read the book of Galatians, the letter to the Galatians, or this letter, 1 Corinthians, and you'll find the opposite. You'll find that he's uncompromising. You'll find that he's highly principled. Of course, not everyone agrees with his principles, but no one could accuse him of being unprincipled. And in the book of Acts, we read of Paul so often suffering, suffering a great deal because of what he believed in, because of the principles he believed in. So what does Paul mean when he says, I have become all things to all men? Well, he's writing in this letter, the first letter to the Corinthians. And the church in Corinth was a church that Paul had planted in a multicultural, multi-faith city. And we read in, from the beginning of chapter 8, that he's dealing with this question of food, sacrifice to idols, and the issue of whether believers should eat that or not.

And that leads to this issue of the believer's freedom, especially in chapter 9, the freedom, the rights that we have as believers in Christ. And in chapter 9, in verses 1 to 18, Paul speaks of his own rights as an apostle, as a preacher, to receive a living from that work. But it's a right that he doesn't take up in order that the gospel may not be hindered. And he kind of sums up his approach in verse 12. He says, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.

[3 : 37] But then he comes to this section in verses 19 to 23, and he's continuing on the theme of giving up rights, giving up freedoms for the gospel's sake. But he kind of expands it to speak of how he goes about reaching different kinds of people with the gospel. And so here we have a great insight into Paul's approach to mission, Paul's approach to spreading the gospel message.

And it applies to my own situation in seeking to communicate the gospel across cultural boundaries. But it applies to us all, because we all come into contact with many different people, with different ideas, different beliefs, from different backgrounds. And we have to ask ourselves, how do we live before them? How do we communicate the good news to them? So I just want to draw out three points from this passage. First of all, our freedom in Christ. In verse 19, Paul starts off by saying, though I am free and belong to no man. So Paul speaks of our freedom in Christ. In Galatians 5, he says that it is for freedom that Christ has made us free. And that freedom is freedom from striving to be saved by our deeds, by keeping the rules, keeping God's law, because we're not saved by that. We're saved by the grace of God. Salvation comes to us as a gift on the basis of what Jesus Christ has done. This freedom in Christ is also freedom from the ritual aspects of Old Testament law. And that's why in verse 20, in brackets, he says, to those under the law, I became like one under the law.

And then in brackets, though I myself am not under law. So we're free from those sort of ritual aspects of Old Testament law that the Jews, the Israelites in the Old Covenant era had to keep.

Also, we're free from merely human traditions, from having to conform to the opinions and rules of others.

often the taboos, things that people add to God's law as binding on our consciences. We're free from that. Now, like all true freedom, it's not a limitless freedom. All true freedom has bounds, has limits to it. And you can think of examples of that. You think of trying to play a football match with no rules. Then it would just destroy the game, because you can't play any game if there's no rules.

[6 : 22] So true freedom always has limits. It is within certain rules. And Paul's, again in the bracket, in verse 21, he says, we're not without the law of God, but we are under Christ's law. So we are under the law of Christ. We are obedient, and we're called into obedience to Jesus Christ. But that obedience brings us freedom. We are free in Christ. Then the second thing is our aim. And our aim, and Paul's aim, is winning people for Jesus Christ. Paul's great aim, his great goal was to win people. And the word win is used five times in this paragraph. And in verse 21, he speaks of saving people, of people being saved.

And the word win, in the originate, has the sense of gain or profit, like you would gain from a business. You know, you'd gain a profit from that. And Paul receives no financial reward. He's been talking about that. But his reward is people, one for Jesus Christ. And this involved a two-fold passion in Paul. Paul loved the gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ. In verse 23, he says, I do all this for the sake of the gospel. And Paul loved the gospel. Paul loved that message of salvation through Jesus Christ, which is what he describes as the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes in Romans 1. And this in itself shows that Paul is not some unprincipled chameleon. His great principle is the integrity, the truth of the gospel. And that's why he defends it from attack in letters like the Galatians, the book of Galatians. That's why he's willing to suffer beating and imprisonment for it in the book of Acts that we can read of. And ultimately, from the early traditions, historical traditions, we know that Paul was martyred for preaching the gospel. So Paul had this passion for the gospel, the message of Jesus Christ. But also, Paul had a passion for people. Paul loved people. If you read his letters, you'll see that. Some of the letters, you'll see the affection and love that he has for people. And that love extends to those who are not yet believers, those who Paul himself describes as being lost and in darkness and without hope and without God in the world.

And Paul wants these people to be one for Christ. He wants them to be saved at all costs, in all ways, by all means. And again, in Acts, we see the lengths that Paul goes to, to reach people, different people, with the gospel. And his love crossed the different boundaries of the day, the religious boundaries, the cultural boundaries, the ethnic boundaries of that time. And he mentions here Jews, those under law, which maybe could be Jews or it could be sort of Gentiles who have their own particular laws, those without law, those who are weak. Paul is not just concerned for his own people, his own tribe.

He's concerned for all peoples, that all people come to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. And his love for people reflects the love of God, God's love. Think of that great verse in John 3, that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. That costly, self-sacrificing love of God that is also reflected in Paul here. Which comes to us today, do we have that same two-fold passion, that passion for the gospel, for the good news of Jesus Christ and of salvation and eternal blessing that comes through him? And do we have that same passion for people, that love for people, that we want people to come into that same experience of blessing through Jesus Christ that we have experienced? So that's the second thing, our aim, winning people for Christ. And the third point is our means. And our means is to use our freedom to become slaves or to become all things to all people, that by all means they may be saved. Paul speaks of making himself a slave. In verse 19, he says, though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible. So though Paul is in reality a free man with rights and freedom, he makes himself a slave to everyone.

he voluntarily gives up his rights, his freedom, in order to win people to Christ, in order that the gospel may not be hindered. And he's providing here a radical challenge for the church in Corinth.

[11 : 37] We saw in chapter 8 that there were people in Corinth who were sort of asserting their rights. They were saying, yeah, we can eat food sacrificed to idols. It's no problem. We can do that. That's our right to do that. We're going to go ahead and do that. And Paul's response to that is, yeah, you can do that because an idol is nothing. But what about the effect that is having on others, on your brothers and sisters who may not have that knowledge that you have? And so he

challenges them about the use of their freedom. He says, yes, you're free. But how are you using that freedom? And Paul speaks here of using his freedom or even giving up his freedom in order to win people for Christ. And what he's speaking of there is he's trying to remove every unnecessary stumbling block, every unnecessary hindrance to people hearing and considering and believing the gospel. Now, maybe we should unpack that a bit. We're talking of removing every unnecessary stumbling block because there are stumbling blocks or hindrances that are of the very essence of the gospel. And if you get rid of them, you get rid of the gospel itself. Things like the cross of Christ and the resurrection and the miracles of Christ.

There's no question of removing those in Paul's message because then you would remove the gospel. Paul, at the beginning of this letter in 1 Corinthians, he speaks of preaching Christ crucified, which is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks. And there's no question of him erasing that from his message because it would no longer be a message worth hearing. It would no longer be good news. That's of the essence of the gospel. If he removed that, then it would be an altogether different gospel, which would be no gospel at all. But there are many other things, things that are not essential to the gospel, which can give hindrance, even give offense to different groups of people, perhaps cultural forms, preferences, different expressions, customs, traditions that maybe were developed in one particular era, one particular context, and were maybe useful then, but maybe now they're no longer relevant, no longer useful, and can even be an obstacle to people hearing and considering the gospel. Let me give a couple of examples from the Bible itself.

The first is in the area of food. And food is still important to, well, food is important to us all, but certain kinds of food are important to many people in the world today. Most of the world's main religions have food laws. Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, all have food laws and requirements. And of course, even among secular people, many are vegetarians, some are vegans. So, you know, food can still be an issue in the world today. And this whole discussion that Paul is dealing with in, from 1 Corinthians chapter 8 through to chapter 11 verse 1, it's triggered off by the issue of food, food sacrificed to idols. Now, there's a New Testament principle, which is that all foods are clean. In Mark chapter 7, we read that Jesus declares all foods clean. And that means that the follower of Christ is free to eat any kind of food. And yet, the Jews, for example, they had very particular dietary laws, laws based on the Old Testament. And if Paul was in a Jewish situation, if he was, you know, among Jews, they would take great offense if they saw Paul disregarding those Old Testament laws. And that would close the door to his message to the gospel. And so rather than have that happen, Paul, when he's working among Jews, he complies with their food laws. He's free from those food laws. He's not bound to them under God. But in order to win them, in order not to avoid hindering them from listening to the gospel and accepting it, he personally gives up that freedom and becomes subject to those food laws. He makes himself a slave to their customs.

[16:10] And yet, when he's with Gentiles, with pagans, then he eats with them whatever they happen to be eating. And perhaps today for us, if you're holding a church barbecue, an outreach barbecue, what are you offering? And it depends who you want to come. I mean, I'm not saying what you should offer, but, you know, who do you want to come to that? How do you adapt to that situation? What food do you offer in that situation? Another example is the example of circumcision and the case of Titus and the case of Timothy. Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians, well, it's about 49 AD, probably just before the Jerusalem council that we read of in Acts chapter 15. And the book of Galatians is really triggered off. It's Paul's responding to an issue that had arisen in the church, which was Jewish believers coming in and saying that the Gentiles who have come to faith in

Christ must be circumcised in order to be saved. And they were preaching this. And Paul in Galatians is adamant that that is wrong. No, the Gentiles don't have to be circumcised. They are saved through faith in Jesus Christ. That is what's saved is we are saved through our faith in Christ. And in Galatians chapter 2, he's kind of arguing against this. And he says that, I brought Titus to Jerusalem.

Titus was a Gentile. And, you know, I brought him to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, and he wasn't compelled to be circumcised. No one demanded that Titus be circumcised.

Well, then there's the Jerusalem council in chapter 15 of Acts, which is recorded there. And that council is about this issue of circumcision. There's the claim that the Gentiles have to be circumcised and keep the laws of Moses in order to be saved. And the council deals with that, and it decides, along with Paul, that no, they don't have to be circumcised. That we are saved by the

grace of the Lord Jesus Christ through believing in him. Well, then in the very next chapter, chapter 16 of Acts, we read of Paul going to Asia Minor and meeting a young believer there called Timothy. And in verse 3 of chapter 16, we read that Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him. So he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. So Titus was not circumcised. Timothy was. Has Paul done a U-turn? Is Paul being inconsistent here? And the answer is no. Timothy's mother was Jewish and his father was Greek, so he was half-Jewish. And that was well known in that area. And he was joining Paul in mission work, mission work among many Jewish communities in that region. And so the first question that these Jews would ask would be, is this guy circumcised? And if he wasn't, that would be a great obstacle to them hearing the gospel. It would be the door shut in their faces. But if he was circumcised, then that would create openings for the message. They would give it a hearing. There's no compulsion in this. There's no, it's nothing to do with Timothy's salvation, but the reason given is because of the Jews in order to win them to Christ. And in other places too, Paul never told Jews to abandon their customs. He told them not to put their faith in them, their trust in them for their own salvation. So we see the flexibility of

[20 : 07] Paul here. Paul is so flexible on issues of food, circumcision, and any number of other issues. And he will do what is best to win people for Christ. And the challenge comes to us today, what in our church might be a hindrance to people hearing the gospel? And we need to be sensitive to our own local communities and cultures, to understand them, to engage with them. And not to have the attitude, which maybe many of us have, yeah, it'd be great if lots of people came into our church and they'd be very welcome here. But the expectation is that those people become like us. And that's kind of turning this on its head because Paul is here speaking about not people coming in and becoming like us, but he's speaking about becoming all things to all people in order to win them.

And Paul sums up his whole approach in verse 22. To all people I have become all things in order that by all means I might save some. And the key word here is become. I have become all things to all people. Paul became like a Jew to win the Jews. He became like those under the law to win those under the law and so on. Now, maybe some of you are asking a question here. You're thinking, surely, aren't we as Christians supposed to be different from the world? Aren't we supposed to be separate?

Aren't we supposed to be holy? And the answer, of course, is yes. We are. We are supposed to be radically different from the world around us. But the question is, how? How are we to be different? And we're to be different not by being some sort of weird Christian ghetto, being different for differences' sake. But we're to be different in that we avoid sin, that we hate sin, that we don't spread malicious gossip, that we forgive each other, that we are honest, that we are pure, that we love God and love our neighbor, that our lives are characterized by love and joy and peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.

Now, in all of these areas, Paul was radically different from the world around. But in others, he was so adaptable and flexible. And that reflects the nature of the gospel. Other religions tend to be concerned to varying degrees with externals. So there's certain places that are holy places, Jerusalem, Mecca, the Ganges, Rome, different places. Or certain languages are considered holy languages, Sanskrit or Latin or Arabic or whatever it is. And certain forms are considered as holy forms, certain forms of architecture or body language or clothing. But the gospel has none of that.

[23 : 14] Andrew Walls, who's a mission historian, talks about how the gospel is translatable and how it becomes home, sorry, it becomes at home in every culture it goes to, rather than sort of coming in as an alien culture and imposing that culture on a new place and a new people. Rather, it becomes at home in the culture. Of course, it transforms the culture as well as a transformative effect. But also, it makes itself at home in every culture it goes to. And the New Testament gives us great freedom in terms of outward religious forms. Buildings, body language, style of music, customs, language, all these things, regulations are really very minimal. And that gives great scope for diversity and creativity in the church of God. Now, sadly, the church has often failed in this and has been unfaithful to its biblical roots. And, you know, often in the past and in the present, it has imposed a particular cultural form of Christianity on new peoples and new places. Often in the past sort of couple of centuries, it was a kind of a Western cultural form of Christianity that was imposed on new places in terms of the songs that were sung, in terms of the architecture of church buildings and clerical garb and so on. There was one Indian believer, a man called Sundar Singh, in the early

20th century, and he came from a Sikh background. And he came to faith in Christ and just felt really that the form of the church and of Christianity in India was alien to him. And he protested against that kind of alien Western form of the church. And he actually became a sadhu, a Hindu holy man, dressed in saffron, and traveled around like a Hindu holy man would, but preaching the gospel of Christ.

And he used a phrase which I think is a really, it's such a good way of putting this. He talked about offering people, and he's speaking of people in India, also offering people the living water in an Indian cup. And I think that just puts it so well. Because, yeah, we offer people the living water, the living water of the gospel, the living water of Jesus Christ. But what kind of cup are we offering it in? And for you here, you have to offer people the living water in an Aberdeen cup.

And I can't tell you how to do that, but you have to work that out. How do I offer people the living water in the cup that is appropriate to them? But Paul's ultimate model in all of this is Jesus himself. And in fact, at the very end of this section, this sort of section of 1 Corinthians ends in chapter 11, verse 1. And he there says, follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.

And Paul speaks of becoming. And our whole faith is based on one great act of becoming. When the eternal word, who was eternally with God and eternally was God, became flesh and made his dwelling among us. How Jesus Christ, who is the eternal God, the eternal word of God, became human and came among us and identified with us in order to save us. Or to put it how Paul puts it in Philippians chapter 2, he speaks there of Christ Jesus, who took the form of a slave. So Christ Jesus, who was in the form of God, and being in the form of God, he had absolute freedom, absolute rights.

But he took the form of a slave and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. And he did that for people, for all kinds of people. He gave up his rights, his freedom, for the sake of others, for the sake of the world. It was a costly, self-sacrificial love, a self-giving, a gracious self-giving. And we are to follow that. We are to do the same. We are to give up our rights and freedoms for the sake of others, in order to win them for Jesus Christ. And I just conclude with the way Paul concludes his section of his letter. In chapter 10, verse 31, he says, So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks, or the church of God, even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good, but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

[28 : 32] Amen. May God bless his word to us.